

A Deal With The Devil.

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Armin takes a deep breath. "I accept your deal." he forces the words out of his throat. "Take me back to three days before the rumbling so I can stop it."

Ymir's eyes narrow with mischief. She fills her lungs with air and smiles from the depths of her heart. Nothing happens for a few seconds. Armin is stuck in the reality of Eren's warmth, founder Ymir's intimidating presence and the weight of his choice.

Ymir takes small steps to him and kneels down. In his eye level. "You... Truly are a lucky lad to have someone like him." she whispers. Armin doesn't know who she's referring to.

Or

The Rumbling ended in his friends and comrades deaths and the world's loss. In order to change that, Armin Arlert makes a deal with Ymir Fritz to go back in time. The cost might just be too heavy for him to bear.

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Paradise, Hell on earth.

Return the kids to their parents.

Mirror memories and Deja-vu

Around the world in eighth months.

3rd day of fall.

The Angels frown, the devils worship.

The Angels frown, the devils worship II

Freedom

Epilogue

Lost souls

Chapter 1: Lost souls

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The ground shakes with every step.

They look like angels of vengeance storming towards Marley, and all Armin can do is watch them from that rooftop in Shiganshina with Mikasa right next to him. He shouts something but she can't hear, neither of them care.

because both are too busy watching Eren's founding titan walk away, march away while leaving Armin and Mikasa behind. He goes to crush the world under his feet, the same world Eren and Armin were supposed to see with each other.

For a split second, Armin sees child Eren running away from them instead of the founding titan. Armin shuts his eyes and tries to forget immediately.

The rumbling is a mistake.

They need to stop Eren before it gets out of hand. Armin has never been more sure of anything in his life.

Annie kicks Reiner awake.

Outside is a mayhem and a party for those who sacrificed for the rumbling to happen. For this massacre to start. But for Armin, his friends and the warriors there is only one clear goal.

Stop Eren.

Stop him from making a mistake.

Stop him from destroying the warriors' homes.

Armin holds his fist above his heart as he wonders where the Eren he knew disappeared to.

Reiner slowly wakes up, he stares up at them and the dim yellow light of sunset as Gabi tells him they were not his enemies any longer.

Armin looks at Annie, and wonders if it's his heart that flutters at her sight or Bertholds. After all this, Eren's words are glued to his brain and shake the very foundations of his mind.

Armin doesn't show any of these out loud. He doesn't say anything.

Connie puts his hands on his hips and chuckles. "Get up," he says.

Reiner massages the sides of his aching head. "Where to?"

Connie clicks his tongue. "To save the world."

And it's a disaster.

Armin thinks as he listens to the only sound in his dark cell, the sound of droplets of water falling down from the wet roof.

Dungeon. He's in a dungeon because Neither Historia nor Eren can risk letting him go free. For two different reasons entirely.

(Historia's reason can be summarized into one cursed word: Politics.)

(Armin doesn't like to think about Eren's reasons.)

Armin presses the back of his head to the cold metal of the bars. His eyes stare out of the narrow window to see the nail of the moon. He

hits the back of his head to the bars one more time just for the cold impact it provides.

Dang.

Dang.

Dang.

He's alone. He knows there is no one else kept in this high security dungeon right underneath the palace. The dungeon is built somewhere no light can pass into other than from a small window with the width of maybe Armin's fist.

In the deep of the night, Armin can barely see the stone walls if it wasn't from the light coming from the other side of the bars and from the torches in the hallway.

And his bones shiver from the cold.

Drop.

Drop.

Drop.

Armin hugs himself, he rests his head on his knees and tries to calm his shivering breathing down. No, if Eren comes down, which he will at some point to taunt him, he must not be weak. He must not.

Armin is wrong.

because it's not Eren who comes down, it's an angry Military Police man who yells orders at Armin like he's a criminal. Well, he is, isn't he?

Armin doesn't move. Why would he? What's the point in obeying or defying this man? Armin can't remember why he stood up every time even if he forces his brain to remember.

The next moment the doors to his cell are opened and a guard forcefully yanks his hands behind his back to handcuff them.

Armin doesn't resist.

He lets the guards manhandle him to his feet and push him out of the cell. He can feel the press of a gun's pistol to his back and another pointed at the nape of his neck.

Yes, right. He is still the colossal titan, a danger to the eyes of many.

"Don't even think about transforming." The guard growls angrily, pushing the pistol harder into Armin's neck.

That makes the blond smirk. These people have seriously overestimated his resolve.

He doesn't understand where he is being taken and he doesn't care. It won't make a difference anymore. All the people he cared about were killed. The ones who remained no longer cared about him, like Eren as the prime example.

Until the warm light of the sun touches his eyes and he notices he is being taken towards the main body of the castle. To the throne room.

To Historia.

The throne room is just like he remembers it. Superb and drowned in the light of the sun, the light dances around Historia's throne, her golden crown, and her empty throne room. It makes Armin's vision go blind for a moment. That one moment is enough for the guards to kick him down to his knees. "Kneel before the queen, *traitor* ."

I deserve this . Armin thinks as he slowly raises his gaze to meet Historia's. Her eyes are disappointed, but not surprised. *I went against her kingdom when I decided to stop the rumbling with the others. There is no saving me now...*

But his eyes automatically search the room for others. Maybe he could see a familiar face. But they were completely alone in that throne room. Historia, Her soldiers, Armin and the presence of his so called "sins" of going against the rumbling.

Armin's eyes scan around the throne room. He doesn't see Eren in his usual green shirt standing somewhere away, maybe he doesn't want to celebrate his win this way?

Armin looks down, the white ceramic suddenly so interesting. He doesn't have the energy for all this.

"Armin Arlert."

Historia's voice is heavy, but serious and ruthless.

"You are charged with numerous amounts of treason against the crown." she says, her voice echoes when she suddenly stops. "Aiming to stop the rumbling of Eren Yeager. Teaming up with enemies of the nation. killing 40 soldiers of Yeager's group from the three regiments in the port with the azumabitos." Historia read the long list of Armin's crimes. "And... You are the only survivor of those who tried to stop Eren Yeager."

Armin doesn't react, as if Historia was talking to a wall. He held his head low and his unruly hair covering his closed eyes. Armin was numb. He was numb to all Historia accused him of because they were all true.

"Anything to say in your defense?"

Armin wants to laugh.

For the first time, Armin looks up to meet Historia's gaze. "You see..." he whispers, his lips stretched to a smile. He shrugs even with his hands tied behind his back. "It doesn't matter what I say, because this isn't a court, it's merely a sentencing."

Historia's eyes frown. "You don't expect a court martial for a traitor, do you?"

No, Armin doesn't. In fact, he's happy this'll be over with.

"You were promoted to the commander of the survey corps after Hange Zoe, but even that status is meaningless if you're a traitor." Historia says. "According to law, your crimes are punishable by death."

She takes a step forward, glaring daggers in Armin's eyes. "You carry the colossal, so you can't be executed by normal means. We will have a trusted soldier inherit your titan in a week."

She straightens her back. "Normally, treason is held in a public execution. But due to the circumstances, we can't do that."

am I supposed to be grateful for that?

Armin chuckles.

Historia ignores it. "Take him back to the dungeons and under surveillance constantly." She orders the guards.

The guards grab his elbows and push him up. Armin struggles for a moment just to look at Historia's face again and demand one question: "Where is Eren?"

It takes Historia by surprise.

The gun into his nape digs deeper into his flesh. "What do you have to do with Eren Yeager, you traitor?" he yells.

Historia holds up a hand to silence the guard. Her eyes narrow dangerously. "He didn't want to attend your sentencing." she says simply. "His presence is too much to demand after all this, Don't you think?"

With a wave of her hand, Armin is taken away and shoved back into his dark cell in an instant.

Soon, it feels like Armin wasn't taken outside at all. His eyes slowly close and he rests his head against the cold floor.

Thump

Thump

Thump

Thump

It appears his body doesn't want to die yet.

Too bad Armin doesn't have any other options.

When Eren comes down, the world changes in Armin's eyes.

An inaudible buzz echoes in his mind. The pain makes Armin sit up and cover his ears in a silent scream. he covers them and shuts his eyes with a loud gasp. When the buzzing stop and Armin opens his eyes, he's no longer in a dark, damp cell.

He's somewhere that is no longer night. But a day with a clear sky.

And the warmth of the sun shines on his exhausted body.

He is in the open, and saltwater air from the ocean blows in his face. Armin sits back and his hands bury into the warm sand. His eyes stare at the ocean. Its blue color soothes his eyes and the sand under his body calms his raging heart.

The waves come up until they are wetting Armin's bloody and muddy clothes.

Armin stares at the view for a few more seconds before letting his mind drown in the reality that this isn't real. This is probably another one of Eren's made up scenarios and Armin doesn't want to lose himself in one.

(It's a thought that sends shivers down Armin's spine. The way Eren can just keep him stuck in a made up reality or worse...)

(Make him forget everything.)

Armin shoves those thoughts aside as he crosses his feet and stares out at the ocean in front of him. His heart twists when he notices this might be the last time he'll get to see his beloved ocean. Eren will never let him out of that prison cell.

Even if he does, Historia will never let him. In the way reality has twisted around them, Armin is now a danger to the Yeagerist state they have built on the blood of their allies and enemies alike. And...

Armin lets out a shaky exhale. The water slowly rises until the waves wash the sands in front of him. Armin sees his own tired reflection on the ocean foam.

And now...

And Armin is the only one left of the group that tried to stop the Rumbling. Each of them were killed one by one in front of Armin's colossal titan's eyes.

Each and everyone.

Armin shuts his eyes, he buries his face in his hands. His mind replays his friend's death in front of his face.

Jean.

Connie.

Mi--

Armin's heart starts beating in his throat, his lungs fail to take in their precious oxygen. His eyes see red even in the darkness behind his eyelashes.

Armin's throat dries, aches, like he had swallowed some of the sand under his hands.

His mind is screaming, about the time his throat catches up to him.

"SHOW YOURSELF!"

The words rip themselves from Armin's dry throat without his order. His hands are still covering his face and he is looking down at the waters from between his fingertips.

"SHOW YOURSELF, EREN!"

because this definitely isn't an illusion.

It's a reality of Eren's making.

"Show yourself..." Armin whispers, shutting his eyes. "For once... Don't hide behind the facade of our dreams..."

Just as Armin says that, the reality crumbles around him.

The warmth of the sun disappears as fast as it appeared and leaves Armin in the darkness of his cell.

"I thought we should talk."

Armin knows that voice better than his own.

It sounds like a cruel joke.

Armin laughs hysterically, before he knows it, he is hitting his fist against the ground while laughing. "Ta-Talk?" he burst into laughter. "Wow! That's rich coming from you!"

Armin raises his head and looks into the darkness outside of the bars. He can see a silhouette of a human and a pair of concerned jade eyes.

Armin gives him a maniacal smile as he stands up to his feet. "Well. Well. Well." he says, taking small steps towards the bars of his cell until he's gripping the metal tightly in his fingers.

Eren doesn't react, he just looks at Armin, trying to find a sign of injury or anything really, that rouses his concern. Eren's eyes fix on Armin's, finding the only problem was behind the Blonde's ocean blue eyes.

Armin tilts his head, his eyes wide. "Oh dear." he murmurs, his lips spread to a smile that looks like he's showing his teeth. "You're here to talk?"

Eren wets his lips before he talks. His hands buried deeply into his usual black cloak. Armin wonders briefly if the brunette ever gets tired of that green shirt.

"Yes," he says. Eren takes a step closer to the bars. "Armin, are you ok? It's been three days and you haven't touched any of your food."

Three days.

Armin's smile falls.

It's been that long? His friends have been dead for three days? Rumbling happened three days ago? A whole three days since Mikasa took her last breath. Three days after he was thrown into this dungeon with his contact with humanity was the guard who put his dinner whenever Armin was passed out or not looking.

"Heh. Heh." Armin laughs sarcastically. "No wonder I've lost my mind."

Eren takes a deep breath as he takes another step towards Armin's cell. "Armin..." he whispers, putting his warm hands over Armin's ice cold ones. "Please, Don't--"

Armin's hand shoots and he grabs Eren's collar. He pulls him closer, Eren lets himself be pulled towards the bars, Armin knows he isn't strong enough to do it on his own.

(Eren lets him do it, because this is the first reaction he's gotten out of Armin since he was put in this cell. Deep down, Eren was thanking whatever dynasty that snapped Armin out of his trance. Eren knew showing him the ocean was just the right trigger.)

Armin grits his teeth together as he stares into Eren's jade green eyes. His fingers pull Eren's collar closer, almost pressing him to the bars. "Are you happy now?" Armin yells, his fingers digging into the already torn fabric of Eren's shirt. "*Are you happy now?*"

No matter how many times he shouts it in Eren's face, Armin can't convey how much he truly loathes the man that stands in front of him.

"You came here to talk, THEN SPILL!" Armin yells again. "Tell me you regret it! Or tell me it was worth it!"

It doesn't matter, not at this point, what Eren's intentions were. Eren became a monster in Armin's mind once he admitted about the powers of the attack.

The only person who could prevent this future from happening, was Eren himself. And yet-- because of a twisted sense of guilt and stupidity Eren made the same mistake again and again and again until it wasn't apparent if past Eren was in the wrong or future Eren.

Again, Eren acts gentle. So, so gentle it's confusing. He puts his hand over Armin's and swallows hard. "Historia wants to execute you..." is the first word that leaves Eren's mouth.

Armin takes a sharp breath through his nose, a wicked smile stretches on his lips.

Armin lets go of Eren and steps back, but Eren stays where he was, near the bars.

"Oh, I know." Armin chuckles. Slowly, he takes a step back until he leans against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm not surprised. I'm a traitor after all." he murmurs. He raises his head to meet Eren's jade eyes.

If Eren is so sad for him, where were all these emotions when their friends were dying one by one. What was this sympathy? Where did this sense of love suddenly bloom from after the massacre of the rumbling.

Eren grabs the bars.

Armin smirks. "So, where are you gonna be? The front row?"

Eren doesn't speak. Doesn't react. Doesn't move. The dead look in his eyes tells Armin nothing. No words. Armin wonders what happened that Eren became such an unknown variable.

Eren narrows his eyes. "I?" he asks. "I am trying to make things better for you."

"I don't need your pity."

"You're gonna need it."

"I won't." Armin says, hitting the back of his head to the stone walls. The sound of it echoes in the hallways and the dungeon. Armin's blue eyes burn with determination. Armin slowly brings his eyes to meet Eren again.

"If Historia thinks I need to be killed for believing a genocide was wrong. Then so be it."

In a split second, Eren breaks the character of a cold and heartless person and his eyes are terrified. He searches for something in the blue of Armin's eyes before it disappears as soon as it appears.

"Armin..." Eren says. "Historia says if you accept that you were wrong in opposing me during the rumbling. She'll pardon you and you can live the rest of your years in peace."

Armin's eyes blow wide. "WHAT?" he shouts with disgust. He steps back and shakes his head. "Never! because it was wrong. And Our friends died to stop you. Died, Eren. Died!"

"If you want to change anything, then say yes to her offer." Eren spits, anger radiates in his red rimmed eyes and shaking hands that he rests against the bars. "Do something for once other than insisting a future can be built on mere speech and dialogue!"

"Mere? *Mere* speech and dialogue?" Armin shakes his head in disappointment. He walks back until his back hits the cold Stones and he leans into it and crosses his arms. "You-- I don't even recognize you anymore, Eren." he says. "Who are you? You're a stranger."

"Good," Eren whispers back. "If only Mikasa understood that like you do. You want that, don't you--"

It was a split second of instincts of a caged animal being threatened. It was a moment of old memories resurfacing and pouring salt on his throbbing wounds. Armin realizes what he has done when Eren has fallen on the floor. Only when warm blood tickles down his own hand and the world starts to spin that he understands why his hand is throbbing, why Eren is on the ground and his nose is bleeding as well.

He has rushed from where he was and punched Eren between the bars. Stupid. But effective.

The adrenaline pumping in his blood dulls his pain and heightened his courage and makes Armin more and more aware of the metal bar

that is holding between his hands.

"Don't you dare--" Armin growls angrily, reaching towards Eren as much as the bars allow it. He pushes until the bars are digging into his face and shoulders. Until his face is pressed against the cold metal. His eyes scream. His hands reach towards Eren in midair.

"Don't you dare..." He whispers, his dark blue eyes more and more like a maniac. "You have no right to call her name. Any of their names!"

Eren pushes himself up. He clicks his tongue. A 'tsk' sound. A habit that reminds Armin so much of captain Levi. Ever more reason to free himself and just strangle Eren under his fingers. Squeeze and squeeze until life gives out from under his touch. Maybe then this nightmare will be finally over.

because how dare he?

Eren pulls at the wound. It steams and heals in an instant while Armin's will take more to heal. He will have to deal with the narrow flow of warm blood down his hand for a little longer while Eren sits in front of him, completely unfazed.

When Eren turns around, his face is stoic. "Be useful for once in your life, Armin. You're a coward. You've always been one." he says, his eyes digging holes in Armin's eyes. "Is that why you don't accept Historia's offer?"

Armin barks a laugh.

It echoes.

It passes the stone walls and over the dark hallways and it reaches Armin's ears again. It's hysteric. He can't stop it. Armin falls to his knees and hits his closed fist against the ground, still laughing.

Eren steps back, almost mortified at the sight in front of him.

He falls to his knees and reaches for Armin's shoulders through the bars. "Armin-- what the hell happened to your Critical thinking!" He snaps.

Armin can't stop his laughter. It's coming out of his lips a reflection, just the same as the way his eyes gather tears.

"Armin--"

Armin keeps laughing. His fist is starting to bruise because of how many times he hit it against the stone ground.

"Armin! I could only postpone your execution for a week! Damn you-- man up and accept your mistakes!!"

The confession slips right from Eren's lips and into Armin's mind.

Armin's laughter quickly dies down.

He raises his head. "Oh really?" he murmurs. "So it was because of you? I knew Historia didn't give me a week for the hell of it."

Eren pulls back.

"Oh," Armin mumbles. "Don't bother. If Historia isn't willing to have a court martial for me and just gave a verdict. I doubt you can do anything to save your little plaything."

"Armin... You're not my plaything."

Armin tilts his head. "Oh, Oh, I think I am." he says, nodding his head. "There is no other explanation that would fit with your actions."

Eren fists his hand.

He stands up. maybe he was offended, maybe he went to gather his thoughts. Maybe both.

But Armin won't let him walk away this easily. Armin watches him walk back to the hallway, he shouts his question with all the venom he can. "Why did you save me!"

His question makes Eren freeze on the doorstep. His steps halt and he slowly turns around to Look at Armin from the corner of his eyes.

Armin tightens his hold on the bars until his knuckles are milked from their blood. "Don't run away from the question! Back there, At the end of the Rumbling, Why did you save me? If you could have done something-- Why did you wait for everyone to get killed."

Armin pushes the bars back and shuts his eyes. "WHY DID YOU COME OUT! WHY AM I THE ONLY ONE YOU SAVED!"

Eren turns around.

Armin can see nothing but the back of his head through the haze of his own anger. "Why did you... Let everyone die..." Armin's legs give away until he is kneeling on the ground, his forehead pressed against the cold bars but Armin has grown numb to the sensation. "Why did you crush everyone... But you came out of your titan when it was my turn to go?"

The next thing Armin hears is the echoing sound of the doors of the dungeons locking shut.

"I hope you have fun, on the throne you made in blood." Armin spits angrily. Loud enough that Eren will be able to hear it even on the other side of the door.

The moment the metal door shuts, and it's heavy sound echoes all around Armin until the blond is drowning in it- Armin's feet give out the moment his mind supplies him with the fact that he is alone.

His mind blanks immediately.

Ever since the end of the rumbling, Founder Ymir is no longer a child but a grown adult that answers Eren whenever she summons her.

She's bitter about it, cold and lets Eren know everytime she is summoned that she wants to get rid of the power of the titans.

But this time, she just stares at where is staring. They're in the castle grounds. Above the highest roof the royal castle can offer. Eren stares at the horizon, his question is simple. "How did she die?" Eren asks, looking at the clear horizon and not into the woman's eyes.

(The flat and clear horizon.)

Eren knows Ymir is unsatisfied with the ending that came out from all her work. Mikasa didn't kill him.

Eren remembers lifting his face to look at her one last time. And then, her blade suddenly stopped inches away from his neck.

His eyes blew wide, tears springing down her face. "Stop this Eren..." she pleaded.

And then, his memories are blank. So he asks founder Ymir again. "How did she die?"

Ymir tangles a strand of her hair around her finger. Her dried lips pull into a smile. "Mikasa Ackerman..." she whispers, she sounds dry and emotionless. "She drowned... In her own blood."

Eren looks at her from the corner of his eyes. "Why?"

"because she refused to set me free." Ymir says it's the simplest of facts. "So I did it for you, you wanted the world crushed, right? Then what's the long face for?"

"I didn't ask you to kill my friends." Eren says through grit teeth.

"Be grateful that you could save your lover." Ymir reminds him. "I still remember when you were begging me to spare him."

Eren narrows his eyes at the woman.

The most dangerous slave on earth.

And something told Eren she has a wicked plan of her own. Eren narrows his eyes. "You used my body to kill my friends without my knowledge. At the very least, Stay away from Armin." he demands the founder. "He has done nothing to earn your wrath."

Ymir licks her lips, a smile spreading over her face. "... He loves you." she says. "That's enough reason for him to be the next best option I have in freeing myself."

"Stay away from Armin." Eren repeats again, this time angrier.

"You're cursed, Eren Yeager." Ymir laughs. "I will haunt anyone who loves you, one of them would give in in the end, Don't you think?"

Ymir disappeared before Eren's terrified mind could answer.

NO...

Armin!

"Out of my way!"

He pushes Historias guards harder than he intends to. But Eren doesn't care. He sprints down the dungeons faster than he has ever ran. He throws himself towards the bars. "Armin!" he shouts. "Armin are you alright?"

Armin is barely conscious, he was playing with the hem of his shirt but he suddenly stops when he sees Eren. It takes a few minutes for Armin to understand what's happening.

"Eren..." he whispers. "What are you doing down here...?"

Eren is panting, breathing heavily and unable to stop his heart from beating in his throat. "Armin, tell me you said no! Did Ymir talk to you? Did she do something? What did she propose? Whatever it is, say no?"

Armin arches an eyebrow. He slowly stands up to his feet with a chuckle. Slowly, Armin wipes the dust from his clothes. "Well... Well... Well..." he murmurs. "It seems like the great Eren Yeager is worried about something."

Armin has no idea what is happening.

He just knows Eren is in peril and that somehow is enough to satisfy his twisted heart.

Armin steps closer to the bars and clicks his tongue as he stares at Eren. "Oh dear. At least in my final days, I'm happy something is making you suffer." he says, a gentle smile on his lips. "Hmmm I wonder what it is?" he mumbles, tapping his lips with his finger.

"Armin, this is serious."

Is Eren... Pleading with him?

Armin blinks in surprise, the subject suddenly much more interesting and tempting than it ever was. "Duh, what is happening here? You really are here to amuse me before my execution."

Eren shuts his eyes. "Armin, please listen. If founder Ymir ever came near you, scream at the top of your lungs and call the guards!"

Armin frowns. "Huh? What is she gonna do? Kill me? It isn't much different from what you're doing to me!" he adds with a shrug.

"Armin! This is serious!"

"You know what? What is this satisfaction you want to get by executing me publicly?" Armin asks, his lips slowly part and he takes

another step closer to the bars. "It appears you want to see me eaten."

Eren grits his teeth. "Just listen to me--"

"Why?" The challenge in Armin's voice sounds too responsive for someone who has barely eaten in the past seven days. He steps forward until his hands grip the cold bars. "Why should I listen to you?"

Armin breaks character.

He smiles.

He clocks his head and slowly shakes it as a no. "Founder Ymir hasn't come for me yet, if that's what you're wondering. Though... I don't know why she would."

Armin shrugged.

"That bit you explained about Mikasa's choice. There in the paths where we lived our dream together..." Armin asked, searching for the motivation behind Eren's sudden concern.

Eren's eyes fall to the ground, unable to see Armin's eyes.

"You were telling the truth, right?"

Armin watches as Eren slowly nods.

"So that's why we're still in this hell hole." he mumbles, rubbing his chin. "because Mikasa refused to kill you. Ah man... Ok, alright, but what does this have to do with me?"

Eren slowly meets Armin's gaze. "Just scream if Founder Ymir ever appears in front of you."

Eren goes out angrier than he came inside.

Two days.

That's how long Armin has until he's executed.

And his consciousness is getting more and more aware of the fact. Sometimes he fidgets around the room. Sometimes he wonders who his inheritor is. Sometimes he just talks to the ghosts of his friends and tells them he's coming.

On that day, a gentle voice of "what a shame" snaps him out of his thoughts.

Armin is standing in the middle of his dark cell but he can see the woman leaning against a corner because she is *glowing*. Armin can see her and her white dress in complete detail, his eyes almost sting because of the light.

Armin takes a step back and gently covers his eyes. There is no mistaking it.

She is who Eren warned him of.

Founder Ymir.

Significantly older than what she remembers him to be, but still founder Ymir.

Armin closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

"If you aren't going to listen to Eren Yeager... If you aren't going to scream..." she says, taking a step forwards towards him, "I shall start explaining what I want from you."

For a moment, Armin is tempted to obey Eren and scream for the guards.

But what can they do? This woman holds all the powers in the world and now she doesn't appear to be afraid to use them.

Armin shakes his head. "I'm not." he assured her. "What do you want from me?"

After all, in the worst case scenario, she'll kill him. What's that any different from what Queen Historia is planning to do?

Ymir smiles, a one sided and fake one.

She raises her hand and gently cups Armin's face. He doesn't fight her. She moves his face like she's inspecting a horse. "What does he see in you, I wonder." she hums. "Mikasa Ackerman was much more beautiful, and much stronger."

Ymir taps his cheek and steps back. "Either way, your sacrifice will do." she said.

Armin blinks in surprise.

Oh! So she wants a sacrifice.

"... And what is that?" Armin asked, very carefully.

"I need a sacrifice to free myself from the power of the titans." Ymir explains. "Even though I refuse to use it now, I can't free myself until I make a sacrifice."

Ymir's smile becomes even more dangerous. "Last time, I gambled on the wrong person." Ymir says. She stands tall in front of Armin. "I thought Mikasa Ackerman would make that sacrifice for me by killing Eren Yeager. But I was wrong."

She looks away shamefully.

"Now. I intend on waging a game that will have no losing cause."

Armin arches an eyebrow at her words. He slowly pulls himself up using the wall and meets her dead eyes. "And what would that be..."

"I offer a bargain you can't refuse." She says as her lips pull into a dangerous smile. "I'll use the powers of the paths to do whatever you wish, at any cost..."

Armin froze. "What do you..."

Ymir nods. "Although, from the regret you're feeling, I think you would want to somehow fix those mistakes right?"

Armin hesitates.

It dawns in his mind that Ymir can do what she suggests. She is perhaps the most powerful being that ever walked on earth, her own mind the only thing that kept her a slave. Now that she has broken free... She might actually be able to do anything Armin asked of her.

Armin stares into her eyes.

Anything...

Anything...

These past few days, he's been thinking too much about how the events unfolded. If only he could turn back the time and change it. He always stopped himself because it was useless to dwell on what-ifs.

Except now...

It might not be a what-if anymore.

"Can you send me to the past?" he asks before he can filter his thoughts.

Ymir makes a gentle O with her lips, then pulls them into a mischievous smile. "Any time you want." she says.

Armin wants to fly.

"Can you take me to a few days before the rumbling?" he asks, taking a few steps forward. "... Please?"

Ymir tilts her head as she nods.

Armin kills his own excitement because he knows there are impossible conditions behind Ymir's so-called kindness. Armin narrows his eyes and waits for Ymir to fill in the silence.

She does. "In exchange. When you come back to this day, the third day of fall in the year 854, you die." she says. "And with your sacrifice, I will finally break free of the power of the titans."

Armin takes a step back.

She must be joking.

Going back in time...?

"How is-How is that even possible?" Armin blurts out. "Time travel? That's- that's ridiculous, I--"

"I can sense great regret coming from you, Arlert Armin." Ymir interrupts him mid speech. "That's why You'll love this. You can fix your mistakes, I can be set free. And the price of all that is simply your sacrifice. Don't you think it's a great deal for someone in your position."

Armin shut his eyes.

Ymir was right, Armin didn't have much of a choice in this matter. He'd be lying if he said her offer wasn't tempting.

If he could return back to before the rumbling started. He could save everyone, save his friends. Be near Eren and stop him.

Or maybe saving Mikasa would be enough.

Slowly, she holds her hand in front of Armin with a sly smirk. "Deal?" Ymir says, holding her hand in front of Armin's face.

Before he knows it, Armin's hands are moving on its own accord. Armin's hand stops an inch away from hers.

"How's that going to free you?" Armin asks out loud. "I mean, I know you probably want to get rid of the power of the titans- but how is my death going to help that?"

Ymir tangles a strand of her hair around her finger, she slowly licks her lips. "Ackerman Mikasa had to give up her love for Yeager Eren to save the world. That was her most precious thing in her heart. Such a great sacrifice of her heart would have freed me." She says. "But this time I want your *whole heart* ."

Armin blinks in surprise. "My heart..."

"The price you pay to go back in time will be your heart." she says. "And I take payment immediately."

Armin swallows hard.

To be honest, it looks like a good alternative to being executed in two days. "What happens after?" he asks. "After I've traveled through the past and reached this point of time after reliving the past?"

"I will pass away and so will the power of the titans. Afterwards, he who made this deal shall die." she says.

Armin takes a deep breath.

Stop overtaking! This is your only choice!

Save Mikasa! Save Jean and Connie! Save everyone!

and that is your only way!

Armin holds his hand up, waiting for her to shake his hand. "Fine." he says. "But I need some time to think about it. Can you really take me back to before the rumbling so I can save my friends?" he asks again for good measure.

Ymir nods.

She shrugs, some of her silky blond hair falls into her shoulders by that motion. "Why do you need to think?" she asks. "You're dead either way. They want to execute you, do they not?"

And that... Is the simple truth.

But Armin has never accepted a deal without thinking about it and now is no exception.

Suddenly their silent dungeon was bombarded with sounds of footsteps running towards his cell.

"Oh, it appears our time has come to an end." Ymir says, waving her hand in the air. "You have until your execution to make up your mind. Whenever you do, just scream 'I accept your deal'. See you until then." She tells him before she disappears.

Armin's attention goes towards the sound coming from the hallway.

Eren jumps inside. A guard follows him after. Eren looks like he hasn't slept since the last time they talked, with his long hair untidy and the way his voice was angry as he barked at the guard to open the door of Armin's cell.

Eren throws himself inside the moment the door is opened. He takes Armin's face in his hands, Armin sees that his jade green eyes are moments away from crying as they searched Armin's face for injuries. "Armin-- I came as soon as I heard you were talking to someone!" he murmurs, he steps back to scan the rest of Armin's body for an injury.

Armin knows with an eye rolling resolve Eren can do absolutely nothing if Ymir wanted to do something with him.

Eren turns to the guard. "Bring a doctor."

"But sir--"

"I SAID BRING A DOCTOR!"

The guard doesn't hesitate to obey.

The moment they are alone, Eren breaks down. He suddenly hugged Armin from over his shoulders like his life depended on it, squeezing his body to the point Armin had trouble breathing.

He suddenly stepped back, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "I thought she did something to you." Eren cups his face, pressing their foreheads together. "Armin, please, Don't believe a word she says."

Eren's hands are burning, but soft. He gently moves his thumb over Armin's cheeks. For once, Armin sees fear in Eren's eyes.

Armin shuts his eyes.

this man wants to execute you.

remember that the next time you fall for his schemes.

Armin shuts his eyes. "Get away from me." he hisses angrily.

After a moment of disbelief, Eren lets go and steps back. "Armin, please... Accept you were wrong."

Armin's eyes scream murder. "Never."

"Armin--"

"NEVER!"

I don't need to.

With the deal I can make with Ymir. I won't need your pity or Historia's forgiveness.

Eren eyes slowly close. "I will find a way." Eren promises him. "This won't be the end."

"I don't need you to think about finding a way. All the ways you've found in the past were nothing but mistakes!" Armin snaps.

As if he hadn't heard him, Eren grabs his shoulders. "I will find a way. I promise you. You aren't going to die here."

Armin pushes him away. "Your promises mean nothing to me!" he says.

But Armin can't ignore the passion he sees in Eren's eyes, Nor the fact that Eren has never once gone against his word.

Hour by hour, Eren comes to check on Armin. Almost restlessly. Eren won't stop until he has felt Armin's steady pulse under his fingertips or felt Armin's breathing in his embrace.

Sometimes he stays curled up next to Armin just to wake up as if he was zapped with lightning. He wakes up and checks Armin's pulse and breathing.

Armin kept quiet about the deal with Ymir. He could see the senseless worry in Eren's eyes. He is afraid of what Ymir might do to Armin.

(Little does he know Armin will accept her deal with open arms.)

Everytime he begs Armin to accept the deal. To make things worse, Historia has said she won't accept a confession from Armin until it's made publicly, Which Armin refuses to even think about.

Eren's efforts suddenly cease the night of his execution.

The next morning, Armin Arlert will be eaten by a loyal soldier of Historia's choosing. The colossal will be passed, Armin will be no more.

That night, there was no more of Eren's impulsive worry. He didn't come down the entire night.

Armin is beginning to worry whether he did something stupid again, something stupid enough for Historia to finally think "enough is enough"

Armin has been here for only a week and yet he knows the layers of this cell by heart. From the cold stones to the smell of dampness. Armin hugs his knees and presses the back of his neck to the wall.

In the silence, he wonders who Historia has chosen to inherit Armin's titan.

Not that he's going to let that happen...

Armin's intentions are clear. He will accept Ymir's deal, no matter what happens. He will go back in time. To three days before the rumbling and stop this mistake from happening.

There, he can tell Hange all about Eren's plan. About the wine. About Levi's squad turning into titans in the forests. All of them. The plans are already forming in Armin's mind, the key would be to keep Zeke away from those who drank the wine.

Yes, three days is the perfect timing.

He has enough time to stop all this and prepare the nation for Markey's attack while stopping the Yeagerist from rising to their strength.

Armin smiled to himself.

In the end, his life looks like a small price to pay for salvation.

His trump card is that Eren still doesn't know about what Ymir proposed. Which means Eren of the past won't know.

Which means he'll be caught off guard, not even the future-seeing ability of the attack titan can ruin his plans.

Armin smiles to himself, too joyfully for someone who was gambling his life.

He looks at the ceiling, a gentle smile on his lips. All he had to do was to call Ymir and tell her he accepted her deal.

Just as he opens his mouth, he sees a shadow from the corner of his eyes. When he looks at the bars, specifically who is behind them, Armin slowly shuts his mouth.

Eren plays with the keys of his cell until the doors open. Neither says a word as he steps inside. Armin has long given up on keeping Eren away from himself.

He is probably here to check his pulse again, thinking Ymir would hurt Armin.

(He wasn't wrong, was he?)

Eren doesn't.

He leans against the wall and slides down. He hits the ground with a loud thud right next to Armin.

Eren doesn't stay guard outside of his cell. Or comes and checks on his vitals like everytime else. Armin is sitting on the ground, leaning his head on the stone wall. Eren sits right next to him, their shoulders touching.

Neither break the silence.

Eren puts his head over Armin's shoulder. It takes all Armin's willpower not to flinch away. It seems strange to want to be away from Eren when they were "touchy" all the time according to their classmates in the training corps.

Now, Armin doesn't know what's normal or abnormal anymore.

because this isn't just a normal night in the barracks. Or a rare night at the beach.

Tomorrow, Armin will be executed.

"I'd say let's run away together."

Those are Eren's first words.

Armin looks down at Eren, his eyes wide. Eren looks up and meets Armin's eyes with a gentle smile.

Eren gently reached for Armin's face, a gentle touch that's completely in contrast with his hardened hands.

Eren smiles. Armin meets his eyes. He sighs, giving up on fate when he doesn't see what he was searching for in Armin's eyes. "But I know you will never run away." he murmurs as he takes his hand back.

Armin slowly closes his eyes. Eren puts his head back on Armin's shoulders and Armin hesitantly puts his head over Eren's.

It feels... warm.

In a damp and cold cell like Armin's, that's all he asks for.

Armin stays like that until Eren's breathing turns into a gentle rhythm, signaling that he has fallen into a peaceful sleep, something Armin knows he hasn't had in at least a year.

Armin looks down at Eren. He looks... Nothing like the devil of paradise, nothing like someone who just killed everyone outside the walls. Instead, he looks like a scared but blessed and hot headed child he remembers.

The same boy he ran to the moment he found the slightest bit of information about the outside world.

Now, he was sleeping on his shoulder, in his cell, when Armin is supposed to be executed tomorrow.

Armin can't help but smile when he gently brushes Eren's hair out of his face. He leaned down. "I'll fix this." Armin promises him. "I'll fix this mess, I promise. I'll save our friends and I'll save you."

It's time.

Armin feels it in his heart. It's time.

His blue eyes close for a second. "Founder Ymir." he whispers, knowing when he opens his eyes, she will be standing right in front of him.

Armin opens his eyes, and Ymir is there.

Armin takes a deep breath. "I accept your deal." he forces the words out of his throat. "Take me back to three days before the rumbling so I can stop it."

Ymir's eyes widened with mischief. She fills her lungs with air and smiles from the depths of her heart.

Nothing happens for a few seconds. Armin is stuck in the reality of Eren's warmth, Ymir's intimidating presence and the weight of his choice.

Ymir takes small steps to him and kneels down. In his eye level. "You... Truly are a lucky lad to have someone like him." she whispers. Armin doesn't know who she's referring to.

Time slows down in Armin's eyes as she raises her hand.

Her fingers touch his forehead.

His mind blanks immediately.

Armin is falling.

The memories flash before his eyes fast enough that he is falling.

Invisible hands rip his heart out of his chest just to push it back inside his ribs.

Armin screams but no voice falls from his lips. He struggles but there is nothing to hang onto.

So Armin falls...

He falls...

Falls...

Falls...

Until he lands.

Armin's head is dizzy. The world is spinning around his eyes. He can only see a large pile of steam in the sky before he falls to the ground.

He falls to the ground because his body is too small. He's too small and his falling hurts too much. His mind can't control such a small body with ease.

Wait, small?

Armin looks at his own hands, it's *tiny*. There is dirt under his hands and bruises from fighting the bullies and he can feel a swelling on his

right cheek.

"Armin, are you ok?"

Armin turns back and balances on his elbows and knees. He stares at where the sound is coming from, its Eren.

He crawls back, terrified, because Eren is running towards him and Eren is-- Eren is a child.

A child no more than ten years old, with the same famous green shirt before it was worn to shreds and his jade eyes burning with raw concern.

So is Mikasa who is running behind him.

Mikasa...

Armin's eyes widen, his heart skips more than a few beats.

He hopes, with every fiber of his being, that this was wrong.

Armin is too stunned to move, or to speak. So is Eren and Mikasa when they see what's above the walls. Armin snaps his head back.

They're in Shiganshina, there is no mistaking it.

This is Shiganshina, this is their home! And Armin is a child!

And the colossal titan who is currently standing behind the walls and looking down at them is Berthold.

In his colossal titan.

"Wait..."

Armin steps back. He suddenly crushes his small head between his tiny, *Tiny*, hands. He shuts his eyes tightly as his mind recites the words like a broken mantra.

WRONG TIME.

WRONG TIME.

WRONG TIME.

TOO FAR. TOO FAR. TOO FAR.

Ymir hates him.

She must hate him, sending him back so much to the past all just for him to repeat one of the worst days humanity ever witnessed.

What can Armin even do right now! He's nothing but a useless scared kid that knows nothing of the world around him with barely any connections to people who can truly make a difference.

Armin buries his fingers in his hair, takes them into his fist and *yanks*.

No!

what the hell should I even do!!

Armin looks up at the colossal titans face. there is no remorse, just like he remembered it. A monster, looking down at them and reminding them how titans are higher in the chain of food.

Armin's breath catches in his throat.

Berthold takes a step back.

It only takes a kick for him to break through wall Maria.

If I had a penny for each fic I started it by threatening to kill Armin, AKA my favorite character, I would have 3 pennies. It isn't alot but it's wierd it happened 3 times.

Anyway, fair warning to everyone. I have a bunch of twists in mind, so be warned.

Oh! And my twitter is: @[Rose_lily_sun](#)

And tumblr: @[Rose_lily_sun](#)

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Never travel

Chapter 2: Never travel

Like it or not, Armin is now in the past. He's in one of humanities worst days and he has to make the best of it now.

Looks like Ymir hates him.

Hello there! I hope everyone has a good day!

First of all, thanks for reading and commenting on the last chapter!! It makes me so happy!

Let's hope I can keep up with the long chapters lol.

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

character deaths, blood, injury and hospital!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Ymir appears like a star in the darkness of the night.

He takes Armin's face into his hands and narrows her eyes. "Thank you, Armin Arlert, for accepting the deal." she says. "But now that you have forfeited your death, know that the paths will protect you until the third day of fall of 854 when it'll take your life. So don't try to kill yourself before then, it won't work."

Armin's senses are numb.

He feels his body isn't real, like it's some dream he's reliving.

Ymir tilts his head up so he meets her piercing gaze. "Alert Armin. This is your only chance at changing the future. Don't let the sacrifice go to waste." she says.

Armin's eyes can't focus on her face anymore.

"Remember, there are some events in time you can not change no matter how much you try." she warns him. "And there are things you can change, but you'll have to pay its price."

The dream ends before Armin can ask what she means.

The gates of the three walls aren't made of hardened titan.

They are made of mere sticks and bones and concrete which even a normal titan could break through if they were slightly bigger. It's nothing of a wonder when the colossal titan breaks it with one kick and sends giant rocks flying around their city.

And the titans march in.

Giant, humanoid monsters that walk inside with grins on their faces and roars on their tongues.

Armin stares at them with horror, his tiny hands start to shake and his child-heart beats in his chest.

Armin had long ago tried to forget about this day. Maybe his mind was just too focused on surviving one day after another that he forgot about this day. The first time, he didn't particularly lose anything. Him and his grandpa didn't have much in Shiganshina and they escaped in one piece. He even failed to see a titan the first time around.

Now however, Armin narrows his eyes in determination at the upcoming titans.

Eren and Mikasa take off towards their own home, Armin looks at them.

Ymir must hate him to send him back here. He asked to be sent to three days before the rumbling and she did the exact opposite by sending him all back here.

Nothing he can do anymore.

Damn you Ymir!

What must I even do!! Should I jump after them?

No, Hannes! I must tell him or else--

Armin holds the sides of his face and pushes until he can feel the pain of his head being crushed by his hand.

The common sense wins and he runs towards Hannes, or well, where he thinks he'll be. He's right, he grabs the garrison's sleeve and cries fake tears about The Yeagers being crushed, exaggerating everything.

Hannes blinks in surprise. He gasps and shouts: "Go to safety." as he runs south towards the Yeagers house.

Armin stops, the crowd around him runs towards the interior gate to save themselves. To Armin, they don't exist, Armin only sees Hannes running south and the giant heads he can see from above the houses.

Armin fists his tiny hands.

There is nothing Armin can do.

He is a weak child with no resources in the middle of a mayhem with his pending doom approaching by the second.

But you have another chance.

Time slows down.

It becomes clear in Armin's mind, the only thing he can do is very simple. Armin has to follow Hannes to the Yeagers home. The titan that eats Carla Yeager is none other than Dina Fritz, a titan of royal blood.

Armin's eyes widened.

Dina Fritz!

He can't stop Carla from being eaten but he can at least see what Dina's titan looks like for future purposes! After all, Eren discovered his powers with Dina for the first time!

She might as well be the answer to Armin's conflict in the future. If they have a titan of royal blood on the island then Eren won't--

Armin grabs the sides of his head as he runs towards the Yeagers house. His small feet can't run as fast as his adult self and his breathing quickly fails him as he reaches the destroyed home.

By that time, Hannes is already trying to run towards a blond titan with a wide grin. A row of dirty yellowed teeth in her mouth.

Armin takes a good look at the titan of Dina Fritz. He memorized her face, her bony chest, everything that will help him identify her later.

"ARMIN! Come help us!"

Eren's yell snaps Armin out of his thoughts.

Armin looks at the two of them. Eren and Mikasa who looked completely hopeless as they tried to lift the rubble from Carla's body.

Armin's heart stops when he sees Mikasa's eyes so lost. Eren, not so much.

"MIKASA!" he screams as he runs, a new motivation curls through his veins as he sees his friend.

Eren sees him too. His hands are tightly wrapped around debris and trying to pull Carla out from under the rubble. Eren shouts for his help and Armin springs into action.

He stands next to Mikasa. His hands are small and barely help lifting the roof of the house. But he tries his best, the wood digs into his hands and bruises them but Armin still forces it.

Carla is moments away from shouting at them. "Eren, Mikasa! Just turn around and go!" she shouts. She looks at Armin with her eyes narrowed. "Armin, knock some sense into them like you always do-- RUN!"

Armin looks at the woman, shocked.

Eren ignores it and pushes the debris harder. Armin looks down at Carla. His eyes just tear up at the sight. He is still a child, he is still weak and emotional and can't stop his heart from throbbing.

The titans shake the ground. Their footsteps and the screams of the innocent echoes in Armin's mind like it never did all those years ago.

Suddenly, Armin just wants to curl up and run to his grandpa. He's suddenly glad he didn't have to witness all this when he was really ten years old.

Just as he thinks about that, Hannes runs back towards the three of them, his face laced with horror. He doesn't wait, he throws Eren across his shoulder and takes Mikasa off the ground. "I'm sorry Carla..."

Hannes shuts his eyes. "Go find your grandpa, Armin." he says. Armin watches him slowly step back from the rubble.

Eren screams.

Hannes waits for only one more second to look at Armin from the corner of his eyes. "Go! Get your grandfather!" he snaps and starts running.

Armin crawls to his feet. His heart skips a beat as he remembers his grandfather. Blood flows in his head and he wants to scream.

"Gr-Grandpa..." he gasps. Armin steps back, he runs back.

"Armin-- go, save yourself little boy..."

Armin looks down for a moment, tears are streaming down Carla's face. Armin's lips tremble as he walks backwards.

Memories of another time flashes before his eyes. Of the time Eren was showing the world to Armin in the paths. At the time Eren confessed he had sent Dina Yeager's titan to eat Carla. To ignore Berthold and eat his mother.

Armin's eyes well up with tears as he looks down at the very same woman. It's a whole different scenario when he's experiencing it rather than hearing it from Mikasa later on.

The smiling titan, Dina Yeager's titan, is getting close by the second.

Armin kneels down, he suddenly takes Carla's hands into his small ones. "I'm sorry." he whispers. "I know you will forgive him in the end. But please, Don't be mad at him."

He can only imagine what Carla will do once she finds out this was all Eren's doing in the paths.

"Armin-- what are you talking about?" she whimpers. "GO!"

Armin swallows hard. "I'm sorry." He doesn't want to leave Carla like this, he doesn't.

But... There is nothing he can do.

As Armin turns to leave, he stops a long piece of wood near the boulder. His eyes widen as an idea sparks in his mind like a bulb.

He runs to the debris and pulls it near Carla's body.

"ARMIN! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" Carla snaps angrily, "LEAVE!"

No.

This right here. If he saves Carla, then nothing in the future will happen!

(Of course, Armin knows that's a lie. Eren can never change his nature. Neither can Carla's life affect Reiner and Bertholdt's plan in kicking down the wall or Zeke Yeager's appearance.)

(Ymir's voice echoes in his mind. Maybe those are meant to happen no matter what he does?!)

Armin shakes his head.

Armin might be weak, but thanks to the laws of physics, he can use this long long wood to push the boulder just enough so Carla could come out. Or roll it away entirely.

If only he had more time...

Dina Yeager's titan is getting closer and closer by the second. Her steps echo like its death approaching.

No, If he wants to save Eren-- he'll have to save Carla Yeager right now.

Armin puts one small part of the long wood under the boulder and climbs over the top of the stick. His weight is almost enough to push the boulder up a little.

Carla is too stunned to speak.

Armin struggles a little, he is already dangling from the wood and he can't put anymore force.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Dinas titan marches closer.

With a loud yell and some help from Carla as she has enough space to move, the boulder finally rolls over and Armin falls down on his back.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Armin's little hands start to shake. His body is frozen from the sheer force of adrenaline in his veins. He did it-- He rolled the boulder off!

Before he can enjoy his victory however, he is drowned in a pile of shadows. A giant shadow of a titans hand.

Armin's blood freezes in his veins.

Slowly, he raises his head. Dina Yeagers hand is reaching to him in slow motion, it's maybe a few away from his body.

His little limbs are not responding to his mind's shout of "MOVE!" His eyes shake as he pleads with the smiling titan to stop.

His mind double thinking every decision in his life. He can hear Eren's scream like a faint echo in the back of his mind.

"Armin!"

Before he can move, he is scooped off the ground in one fast motion in gentle but firm hands. He is thrown over someone's shoulder, gentle hands holding him by his back and another at the back of his neck.

Armin's heart skips a beat when he notices he's being taken away from Dina Yeager's titan. The titan kept following them. Her hands stretched to catch them as she walked slowly.

Armin blinks.

"Hang in there!" a gentle feminine voice tells him as she tightens her hold on his body. Carla doesn't look back as she runs towards the interior.

Armin was light, he'd always been quite light and weak but now he's extremely grateful for that. Armin's view jumps up and down at Carla's uneven running.

Wait, running?

"Aunt Ca-Carla." Armin murmurs, looking at the woman who saves his life. Carla runs faster.

she panted loudly as she ran.

"Your... Your legs are fine." Armin whispers with horror. "You're running!"

That meant--

She was trying to sacrifice herself to make Eren and Mikasa run away. Even the first time around-- she was fine under the rubble.

The emotions bubbling in the back of his mouth made Armin want to puke.

that's where you got it from Eren.

Sacrificing yourself without having the slightest clue what it would do to others .

Carla keeps running north and eventually, Dina Yeager's titan is caught between the buildings and loses sight of them.

"I think... I think we lost it." Carla huffs loudly, her gentle but weaker hands put Armin back on the ground. "Come on, let's go find Mikasa and Eren."

Armin looks back, Dina Yeager titan looks nowhere in sight.

Carla takes his hand and yanks him back on track. She walks faster than Armin but she pulls him after herself anyway. Armin isn't objecting to that.

Heat rises up to Armin's face. He takes a double take on Carla's face. She's puzzled and troubled and her eyes are bloodshot red, probably she is moments away from breaking into tears.

But she's alive!

She's pulling Armin after herself after she outran a titan. How is that even possible? Her walk was uneven, putting too much of her weight into her left leg and Armin could see pieces of wood and debris stuck on her back, but he didn't comment on her injuries.

"Tha-thank you, Aunt Carla." he mumbles.

This is perfect!

Carla is alive!

Carla smiles breathlessly. "Let's go, before those things catch up to us and--"

"MOM! ARMIN!"

"MRS CARLA!"

Eren and Mikasa ran south towards them.

Carla tries to kneel down but fails because her foot cracks loudly. Armin blinks in surprise. She shows no sign on her face.

Eren runs and tackles Carla in a big hug. Carla puts a gentle hand over his head. Eren sobs into her dress, taking it between his fists and burying his face in her dress. She grabs into her feet and mumbles: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry" like a broken mantra over and over again.

Mikasa is more shy. She just holds Carla's sleeve and says nothing. Carla pats her head, and embraces Mikasa as well. "Hey, you two, I'm fine now. But we have to go."

"Carla! There is debris and wood stuck in your back!" Hannes says, coming after them. "I'm so sorry-- I couldn't-- I was a coward, I couldn't fight the titan off."

Hannes shuts his eyes and looks away. "Armin here was braver than me today."

Armin sighs loudly. It is over now. He saved Eren from his most destructive trauma.

Now, if they get out of here, all will be--

Armin freezes.

Grandpa !

All the sweet sense of victory leaves his body and gives its place to a dread that fills his veins and clutches his heart.

He still has a grandfather to save.

Armin jumps back. He runs without once looking back. His heart beats maddeningly in his too small chest. He doesn't remember the outlines of the city as well as he hopes, but he knows where his grandfather's house was. He covers his ears as he runs north. His small feet tremble as he runs towards his house.

How could I have forgotten about him? My only family!

"ARMIN WHERE ARE YOU GOING!" Eren's scream is a faint sound in the distance.

"Let's get out of here first!" Carla snaps. "We need to get to safety. He's going after his grandfather!"

With the thought of his own grandfather, Armin's blood turns into ice in his veins.

Their house is near the inner gate. Other than the sound of titans footsteps and death approaching them, Armin can hear cannons.

Cannons that tear titans flesh only once every ten shoots. Their sound raptures Armin's earbuds to the point of no return.

Armin runs.

His feet hurt him and his hands feel numb as he runs towards their house. But he keeps running, praying to whoever is watching that his grandfather has been told and left to the interior gate.

He gets to their small house and opens the door. "Grandpa!" he yells, running inside to their small kitchen.

Another bang of canons shakes their house.

"Grandpa!" he yells again, his small body isn't capable of holding so much stress yet, his eyes start to tear up. "Grandpa where are--"

He steps inside the kitchen but there is no kitchen left. Just rubble and a red headed titan that had destroyed that part of the house with nothing but his hands.

Armin freezes. His hands shake as he stares up at the titan from inside their house. The titan turns around to spare a look at him, and Armin sees the old man in his hands.

"GRANDPA!" he yells before he can stop himself.

The titan is maybe a seven meter class. Small and agile enough that it reached this part of town faster than the rest. And the red headed titan holds his grandfather upside down while he's chewing on his left leg up like a lollipop, his grandpa is missing that limb and bleeding heavily.

Armin's mind breaks just as the titan bites down. And the old man's eyes suddenly open to bite down on a scream.

Armin takes a step back.

His eyes meet his grandfathers. There is no way in the world his broken brain will ever forget about this. It's being carved into his nerves like stone.

The titan pushes more of the old man into his mouth, up to his waist.

His grandfather's eyes are dazed. But they focus on Armin long enough for him to say: "Go... Run away..."

Armin shakes his head but his body is frozen on the ground. The titan notices his existence too. He pulls His grandfather's body out of his mouth when he sees an, apparently, more delicious food to feast on. The titan reaches a hand for Armin and the little blond is too frozen to move even when all the alarms are ringing in his mind.

Move.

Move.

MOVE!

He jumps back and barely misses the titans hand as it closes.

Bang!

Another sound of canon, this time dangerously close to himself. The titan chewing on his grandfather suddenly explodes into a thousand pieces.

The bloody pieces of titan flesh hit Armin's face, drenching him in steam and blood. He stares at the titans body that starts to steam.

What were the odds?

A canon actually hit the titan.

His grandfather falls to the ground. The titan steams and disappears into thin air.

Armin blinks in surprise. Then, Ymirs words echo in his brain. The answer is simpler than he thinks.

But now that you have forfeited your death, know that the paths will protect you until the third day of fall of 854 when it'll take your life. So don't try to kill yourself before then, it won't work.

Was the paths... Protecting him?

"... Armin..."

Armin shoves those thoughts away. He looks where the weak sound is coming from. Armin runs to help his grandfather on his feet.

"Grandpa, can you stand up?" he murmurs. He puts his hand on his grandfather's shoulder and tries to help him sit up at least.

The old man is missing his right leg from his knee and there are visible tooth scars on his back and other leg. He hisses as he tries to stand up on one leg. Armin supports him as much as he can, but the old man is bleeding heavily from all his scars.

Armin bites his lip. He looks just like he remembers him. "Grandpa--"

"Armin? Mr Arlert!"

Hannes runs inside. "Oh." he says when he sees the state of the house. "Carla sent me after you, let's go, Titans are just behind us."

His grandfather takes off his coat and wraps his bleeding leg, his hands lack its usual coordination. He looks up at Armin and gives him a knowing smile. "Go find Carla, go as fast as you can, We'll be right behind you."

"But grandpa--"

"We'll be right behind you." he says again.

Armin takes a step back, he makes sure Hannes and his grandpa are actually moving and then he takes off towards the emergency evacuation boats.

The road gets more and more crowded as he walks. He looks back often to see whether hannes and his grandpa are really following him or not. People bump into him and push him forward. Armin's tiny hands are bruised and his body can't keep itself standing after the unbelievable rush of adrenaline of the past ten minutes. He is pushed around like a ragdoll until he eventually steps into the boat.

"Armin!"

Armin flinches unknowingly. Since when is Eren's voice so childlike? Where is that deep tone that settled fear into the bones of all Eldians when he announced the rumbling.

Eren runs to him, holding his hands up and blessed tears in his eyes. A thousand grateful words on his lips, Armin just saved his mother after all.

But Armin ignores him.

He looks at the girl who is holding onto Carla's dress.

For a moment, Armin freezes.

Armin can't stop himself or his hands from reaching the girl. He awkwardly passes Eren without hugging the eager boy. Eren freezes like a statue when his hug is denied. Eren looks back, stunned as Armin takes small steps towards Mikasa.

Images of a distant future crawls through Armin's mind and makes his heart beat harshly against his chest.

Mikasa.

Mikasa...

Armin's eyes gather tears when he sees her again. This time her face is small enough that her famous scarf covered half of her face. Still young. Still small and vulnerable but still stronger than Armin ever was.

Armin's eyes tear up and he jumps to pull her into a hug. Passing Eren like he was nothing. It takes all his willpower not to sob right there.

Because she is alive!

Armin hugs her tighter, tight enough that it takes her by surprise. Armin doesn't let go. Mikasa is shocked and so is Eren and Carla. Mikasa doesn't wrap his arms around him or do anything to return the hug. But Armin doesn't give in. The last time he saw her-- last time he saw her--

"Armin! Come take your grandpa."

Hannes voice cuts Armin's attention like a knife. He breaks their hug with Mikasa and smiles at her instead.

No. This was good.

Armin takes his grandfather's hand and with Hannes, they let the old man sit down.

The boat starts to move almost immediately.

"Oh dear, let me."

Armin is surprised when Carla takes his grandfather's hand from his own and gently helps the old man sit down without slipping on his only leg.

The scenery squeezes Armin's heart.

He covers his mouth so as to not let himself show it. But he stares at his grandfather's wounds and the evident teeth scars and torn clothes on his grandfather.

"It all happened because you went to save Eren."

A sick voice says in his mind. It wraps his arms around Armin's minds and whispers: *"your grandpa might die because of this. Look, his wounds aren't even closed yet. What'll happen if he bleeds out right now?"*

Armin covers his ears and pushes his skull. The pain is soothing, it dulls the thoughts and replaces them with a gentle pain.

It's only until Armin hears a loud tear of fabric that he opens his eyes. Carla rips the lower half of her dress and uses the parchment to wrap it around his grandfather's amputated leg.

"Armin, come here." she says, nodding at him. "Put some pressure on your grandpa's wound until we get some real help."

Armin goes to work immediately. He puts his hand over Carla's and listens to her instructions carefully.

Eren huffs, surprised. "Since when are you a doctor, mom?"

Carla hisses as she sits down, mindful not to push the debris on her back further in. "I've learned a few things from your father," she says, looking at her own injuries with a knowing smile. "like not pushing out something that has stabbed you." she adds.

The boat starts moving.

Their ride is in almost complete silence. Other than the pathetic muttering of people who had to abandon all their lives to survive. Eventually, Mikasa and Eren fall into Carla's embrace. She hugs them and assures them everything will be fine. Grisha was in the capital after all.

"don't work yourself up."

"What matters is that we all survived."

"We'll find your father and think what to do after that."

Armin is busy enough with his grandfather's wound that he barely notices the fact that Eren is in a bliss of being grateful. Even though his face is buried in his mother's dress, he is looking at Armin from the corner of his eyes.

Good good.

Carla is alive.

Will that be enough to stop Eren from the rumbling?

Good grief. Rumbling is nine years from now! Carla's presence won't change the walls falling, Bertholds second attack or Zeke's attack on Ragako or the massacre of the scouts!

"Armin, that's enough, the wound is covered enough."

Armin stops.

Just then, he notices he has been moving back and forth and muttering to himself.

Mr Arlert puts his shaking hands on Armin's hand, a sigh on his lips. "That limb isn't going to regrow itself, stop worrying about it." his wrinkled hands squeezes Armin's tiny ones. "I'm ok, now."

No, you're not.

you were fine before I--

Ymirs words echo in his mind, like a

Threat hanging on his ear.

"Remember, there are some events in time you can not change no matter how much you try. And there are things you can change, but you'll have to pay its price."

Armin swallows hard.

Was his grandfather's injury the price for making Carla live?

By that logic, it would be a life for a life--

does that mean grandpa will die because of his injuries??

Armin jumps and hugs his grandfather. The old man doesn't mind his bruised hands and bloodied clothes and hugs him back. Armin swims in his warmth and familiar smell of soap he has.

NO!

No, I won't let you die!

"Armin, this isn't your fault, you're not responsible for it"

Oh. He said that out loud.

His grandpa breaks the hug and gives him a knowing smile. "Don't think about this now." he says, letting Armin sit next to him. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Armin opens his mouth to say something. Maybe tell his grandpa this wouldn't have happened if he'd just gone after him instead of running after Eren.

Eren.

The incurable source of all his problems

His grandfather puts his hand over his shoulder and pulls him in. Armin pulls his knees to his chest and rests his forehead on them.

This is going to get out of hand very soon, very horribly.

One problem at a time

Armin tells himself, leaning against the present and comfortable body of his grandfather.

Mikasa is by his side. Eren is still somewhat sane. Carla is alive. Mikasa is alive.

Armin fists his tiny hands tightly. He's too young, he was never supposed to go this far back in time. Founder Ymir is probably having a time of her life laughing at Armin's pathetic life now.

Armin shuts his eyes.

doesn't matter.

One problem at a time.

In that boat, as they slowly got away from the armored titans' steam, Armin promised himself he would fix this. This nightmare will take more than he expected, but he will stop that cursed future from happening.

Suddenly, there is a small hand on his own.

Armin recognises Eren's touch immediately.

Instead of pulling his hand back, he turns around to meet Eren. Eren is close enough that his jade eyes are inches away from Armin's blue ones.

And there is a fire in them.

A fire Armin has never seen before but a fire anyway. And Armin has learned to fear this burning motivation in Eren's eyes.

Eren squeezes his hand, then he moves until he's taking Armin by his shoulders.

"What the--"

"You were right." Eren says. "They came, they broke the walls... And if it wasn't for you, I would have lost my mom."

Armin blinks in surprise. *Oh-- Oh no--*

"We will see it, Armin. We'll see the world. One day, we'll kill all the titans." he says, gritting his teeth together. "And be free to see the world we saw in that book!"

(Armin doesn't miss the way his grandfather sighs at that. After all, that book was supposed to be a secret.)

"Every last one of those animals!" Eren vows. "I will kill them all."

Last time, he was angry.

This time, Armin is at loss of what is truly driving him. He stares into Armin's jade.

Then Eren pulls him into a hug. A hug that Armin is too stunned to return. Eren shuts his eyes and covers Armin's neck with his hand. Armin chokes at how familiar their hug is.

"We will see the world, Armin." Eren vows, "even if it's the last thing I do."

Armin's mind runs a thousand thoughts an hour trying to figure out Eren's thought process. Maybe watching Armin save his mother did more bad than good?

But there is one thing that Armin is sure of. Now, his thoughts were just confirmed.

It's useless to change Eren. He can just stare at him as he promises to destroy the titans.

Armin can never change Eren Yeager.

He can never hope to change the devil of Paradise.

When they get to Trost, there is a new man with a face Armin had seen countless times in his previous life but never here.

Keith Shadis ran around the refugee center, asking one person after another of Carla Yeager. When their boat arrived, by a stroke of luck of Shadis' insistence, Shadis was waiting right down at the boat.

He recognised Carla immediately and ran to her. Which explains why he didn't pay any mind to them last time.

"Carla!"

Carla was trying to walk down the boat with Mikasa and Eren's help. Armin had to stay up with his grandfather and wait for help to bring him down. Armin watches their exchange carefully, Keith Shadis must be so happy.

Armin sighs in relief when he realizes now they have a strong string they can pull in the military. He can ask for Shadis help through Carla. He'll certainly comply because the Shadis is so eager to help already.

Carla puts her hand on her son's head. "So bad we could meet again here."

"Are you ok? Any injuries? oh walls, Carla!" he snaps when he sees her back. "Let's get you some help outside the city. This refugee center is filled to the brim already."

Eren's eyes lit up. "Armin's grandpa needs help too!"

Keith makes a face. He looks at Eren for the first time. His brows frown slightly and he hums. "Let's get your mother first." he says, he goes to put a hand on Carla's shoulder to ease her outside, but Carla stops her.

"Keith." she says gently. "Armin saved my life. The least we can do is to help him out."

"But Carla! You're injured!"

"It's nothing. I can carry myself but Mr Arlert can't!"

Carla points her finger at the top of the boat. Armin shys away from her direction. But he stays, he has to stay. As much as he hates to be so dependent on people, this is his only chance to save his grandfather.

"So, if you wanna help, Help them please." she tells him. "They really need it, Keith."

Keith Shadis eventually gives in.

Armin wonders maybe choosing to save Carla is making too many changes to the timeline. He has yet to understand if those changes are positive or negative.

(When he looks at his grandfather, he thinks maybe it's negative.)

Keith gives in. He comes up and helps Armin's grandfather stand up and takes him to the refugee center.

Carla takes it a step further and says the old man clearly needs a hospital. Armin makes sure to cling to Carla's dress and show the best "helpless child" face he can, with his big blue eyes and not so much acting, even Eren is convinced he's miserable.

Carla forces Keith to pull some strings as the ex-commander of the scouts and he gets Mr Arlert into a hospital in Trost, one that's near a lake and two minutes of walking away from the cellar they are using as a refugee center.

The doctors put his grandfather on a bed and the nurses ran around him. Only then does Carla agree to he bandaged up. Keith takes her and Mikasa away.

Armin doesn't notice Eren is following his every move like a shadow. He follows him through the crowd. He follows him into his grandfather's bed. He follows him when Armin begs the nurses to tell him why his grandfather passed away.

Eventually, one of the nurses finds the time and courage to tell him: "We need to stop the external bleeding and do a small surgery to stop his internal bleeding."

The words are a dagger that is stabbed into Armin's chest. He tries to run after the nurse but she pushes him out, and slams the door of the emergency room in his face.

Armin tries to tiptoe up and open the door again, But Eren's hands pull him back and away from the roaring crowd of other injured refugees storming inside.

(If it wasn't for Eren, Armin would have been crushed in the traffic.)

Armin doesn't see it that way.

Eren pulls Armin back, until their little legs are outside of the hospital and safe from the crowd that could crush them without noticing.

"Armin... Armin look at me, are you ok?" Eren says once they're outside. The lake shines behind Eren. He takes Armin's face into his hands and moves it around like a toy, trying to find if something was wrong with him.

"Eren! Armin!"

Armin lifts his head. Mikasa runs towards the lake, towards them, as fast as she can. "I looked everywhere for you two!" she says. "Your mother got bandaged up. They're low on staff so they've asked your mom for help. She'll be fine."

Eren's shoulders are visibly tense but don't talk at all.

Mikasa tilted her head. "How's your... How's your grandpa?"

"We need to stop the external bleeding and do a small surgery to stop his internal bleeding."

Armin looks down, his long bangs cover his eyes.

He yanks his hand out of Eren's grip and walks towards the lake. "Bad." is all he says in Eren's answer.

Armin keeps his back to the two. If he loses control of his tiny body, if the lump in his throat threatens to spill, he doesn't want Eren to see it. He doesn't want to give him the satisfaction.

Armin stares at the lake with wide eyes and fisted hands.

"Armin..."

"Leave one alone, Eren."

Eren's footsteps stop to a halt.

This lake is so clean... So blue...

Armin suddenly grabs the sides of his face and pushes hard enough that his scalp *hurts* .

//No. Don't think about the ocean. Not now, not now.

"I just wanna help you, Armin."

"No! I hate you Eren!" Armin screams. Armin turns around and swings his hand in the air. "All of my problems exist because of you! Because I put you above myself! I hate you! I hate you so much!"

Eren steps back, hurt written all over his face. "What do you mean? I didn't do anything!"

"You did! You did everything!"

If I'd just let your mother die--

If I hadn't thought about your trauma--

My grandpa would be fine right now!

Armin stomps his foot and walks parallel to the lake, way from the hospital, away from the call of death.

He is surprised to find two sets of quiet footsteps following him.
Pitter. Platter. Pitter. Platter.

Armin meets the end of his rope with Eren sooner than he assumed. He stops to glare daggers at Eren. "Why are you following me!" Armin yells.

In a fit of rage, Armin bends down and picks up the nearest pebble and throws it at Eren's direction with all his might. "Get away from me!!"

Mikasa punches Eren from the direction of the small pebble. Eren insists he keeps getting closer to Armin's spot.

Armin has had enough.

He bends down and picks up another pebble. He swings his hand hard enough that this time, the pebble is fast enough to hit Eren right in his chest.

Armin gets a sick feeling of relief when he sees Eren's face twist in the pain of the impact.

"Eren!" Mikasa rushes to his side, grabbing his side and looking for any possible injuries.

He turns to run away but Eren runs to him and suddenly wraps his arms around Armin's shoulder. Tight enough that stops Armin from leaving. He completely ignored Mikasa.

"I said GET AWAY FROM ME!!" Armin screams, struggling to get out of Eren's tight hold but Eren is stronger.

"I won't!" Eren yells back. "I know you're angry Armin, that's why you're saying all this. You don't hate me."

Armin shuts his tearful eyes. "Let me go..." he struggles to unwrap his hands from around his waist but Eren is stronger. He's always stronger.

"I won't!" Eren says. "Mom said it's dangerous for you to be here."

"I'm fine on my own!"

"Then I'll stick to you like this! Throw pebbles at me how many times you want, I'm not leaving you alone here. you're my best friend!"
Eren says like a vow.

Armin feels heavy hands on his shoulders which immediately get his attention from the view of the lake to the person's warmth.

Mikasa grips his shoulders tightly, an unreadable expression on her face. "But please don't throw pebbles at him."

Armin opens his mouth to say something.

But words fail him, he does nothing but exhale.

Since the first time he arrived here, his brain finally realizes this is his new reality.

There is no magically going back to the future or dying after three days like he'd hoped. He'll have to live through this hellhole again until the third day of the year 854 where Ymir will take her payment by taking his heart.

Armin takes a deep breath to calm his nerves.

That's almost ten years from now. Like an eternity.

Eren slowly lets him go and he falls to his knees, burying his face in his too little hands.

Eren's warmth returns again and Armin doesn't feel repelled by it this time. Maybe it's his younger self reacting to it, maybe he's too numb to hate him at the moment.

Eren hugs him awkwardly.

Mikasa, in confusion of what to do after that, kneels down and joins the group hug.

They stay like that until Shadis comes and carries them back to the refugee center.

Armin falls asleep on a white piece of parchment on the floor without meaning to.

Armin is woken up by his spooked body.

He sits up and looks around, people are moving into the refugee center more and more by the hour. Armin's eyes scan the crowd, to see if he can find a sign of Berthold and Reiner.

Or maybe...

Maybe Annie...

Armin runs a hand through his hair. He pulls the blond strands away from his face and looks around.

Right, Grandpa and Carla stayed in the hospital.

Armin sits up and hugs his knees. There aren't many children around here in this cellar. He is sure if he pays enough attention to the small groups of children in this place, he might find Reiner, Annie and Berthold in between the children scooped against each other.

He looked up at the window, guessing from the yellow hue of the sky, the sun had just risen up.

Or maybe not.

Armin rested his forehead against his knees. He needs to stay up for when Dr. Yeager comes to pick up Eren. Armin has to stop this transformation. He needs to stop Eren from getting the founding titan.

That might as well be Armin's only chance.

Dr Yeager can come at any second, so Armin stays up. He crosses his arms on his knees and rests his head on them.

Armin fights the childish fear of the dark and cold that rises in his being. His body wants nothing else than to snuggle near the warmth of his friends and close his eyes but he knows he can't.

He needs to stay up.

He needs to stay up and be there when Doctor Yeager comes and wants to give Eren titans he can never hope to control.

(That's wrong. Eren does control them, he controls them masterfully, he just makes the most mistakes with their power.)

Armin needs to use his silver tongue to persuade Dr Yeager not to give Eren's titan. The man should be emotional if he tells him his wife is dead.

That shouldn't be so hard.

Time passes.

Time passes enough that Armin's mind quiets down that he can hear the snores and breathing of the other children in the room.

Armin's eyes fall closed before his mind has the power to force itself awake.

Armin falls to his side.

His body is just exhausted.

"Grisha!"

His mother's happy cry made Eren open his eyes. He yawns loudly as he forces himself to sit up and follow the sound. Next to him, Mikasa is already awake.

She puts her index finger on her lips and hushes Eren. Her eyes drift down to Armin's sleeping figure next to them.

Eren slaps his hands over his mouth and nods silently. Slowly, he lets his hands fall down. "I'll stay with Armin," he whispers. "You go see if it's dad!"

Mikasa narrows her eyes, she shakes her head. "Armin is asleep! Nothing will change if you stay here!"

Eren's eyes fall to the ground. Then, they focus on Armin's chest as it rose and fell in his sleep. "I want to protect him like he protected me," he whispers.

Mikasa blinks in surprise. "What?"

"He stayed with mom and saved her when we left. How can I ever repay that?" Eren murmurs. His hand hovers above Armin's body but doesn't touch him. "I always knew he was smart. But it's... He's important to me and I've just noticed how much he deserves better."

Eren shut his eyes.

Mikasa takes his hand and stands up. "That's why you should let him rest," she tells him as she pulls him to his feet. "Let's go and see if Dr. Yeager is back."

Eren gives in eventually. He tucks Armin under the blankets to protect him from the cold. The sleeping boy shivers, curling into himself.

Eren smiles.

The two of them leave the small empty space in the cellar and follow the path to the hospital, they don't have to wait long because they

see Carla and Grisha in the doorway.

Not that Grisha was ever distant or ignorant. However, he was never the kind to express his feelings through touch. So Eren and Mikasa were surprised when Grisha let go of Carla to run to them and hug the two of them like his life depended on it.

Eren forgets to breathe for a moment when his father's hands squeeze his body. Eren gets over the shock, his hands slowly creeping up to the old man's body and holding the fabric of his worn coat tightly in his fingers.

He can see Mikasa hugging Grisha back, covering her face with the scarf and Grisha's shoulder. This is the first time Eren witnesses any raw emotion to his parents from Mikasa's side.

Carla kneels down. She wraps her arms around Eren and Mikasa. She starts to hush Mikasa gently, when she starts to shake.

(How grateful can one be? For not losing their family twice.)

"Carla, Eren! Mikasa!" Grisha whispers, holding all of them in his arms. He kisses his wife and lets his children hold on to him for as long as they want.

Eren suddenly hears, "Thank you! Thank you Dina!" slip from his father's lips.

He's probably hearing things anyway.

Eren falls asleep in the cellar again, curled up next to Armin. He seems to be dreaming too deeply that he no longer wants the real world. Eren tried shaking him awake but he stayed sleeping, mumbling a "Not now, Eren..." in his sleep.

Eren lets him rest.

He looks at Armin while he sleeps on the ground. Eren is lying next to him, going absolutely nothing but thinking about how he almost lost his mother today.

How horrible it would have been if she died when he acted like such a brat.

A breeze sneaks into the cellar.

Armin shivers from the cold that dances over his skin and sneaks inside this thin blanket they have.

All thoughts leave Eren's mind immediately. He pulls himself closer to Armin to provide the boy with some warmth.

It works, Armin's breathing becomes steady again.

Eren can't stop himself from smiling. He lets his eyes fall closed. His last thought before he falls asleep is what Mikasa could possibly be doing to help his mother.

"Eren..."

Eren pulls Armin into a closer embrace. They really do need each other's warmth for a good night's sleep.

"Eren... Wake up, son."

Eren's eyes slowly open up. He turns his head and tries to clear his blurry vision by squeezing his eyes. His vision clears when he sees his father slowly detangling his limbs from around Armin's. "Eren... Come with me." Grisha says, extending a hand so his son would take it.

Eren sits up, humming in surprise. "Dad..?"

"Yes, it's me, son. Now let's go."

Even in his sleepy mind, Eren looks at Armin's unconscious face and stops immediately. "Mikasa is with mom." he says, meeting his father's eyes. "I can't leave Armin alone. He's scared and I don't want something to happen to him!"

At the mention of Armin's name Grisha swallows hard. "Armin... I still wonder what drove him to do all he will do."

Eren's reaction is immediately defensive. "Armin hasn't done anything but good stuff!" he mutters. "Why did you wake me anyway, dad?"

Grisha takes a deep breath. "We need to go."

"Go where?"

"I have an important thing to tell you."

Eren huffs, he crosses his arms over his chest and looks. "I'm not leaving Armin in the cold like this. Tell me here. Or wait until Mikasa comes."

Grisha smiles bitterly, he takes Eren's hand and slowly moves towards the forests. "This is something between father and, let's not bring the others into this..."

"Armin isn't like others!"

Grisha sighs loudly. "Eren..."

"No! I want to protect him!" Eren shoots back childishly.

"Protecting someone isn't just protecting them from the cold." Grisha says. "You need to be strong to protect your friends. You need to be strong to be free."

Eren blinks. His jade green eyes shine in the darkness. "Free..."

Grisha nods. "Don't you want to be? To protect your friends from the cruel reminders of this world?"

Eren stands up, he takes his fathers hand without any question.

Eren doesn't know what his father is talking about. He walks with him, hoping the old man has something that will magically make everything better. He looks back at Armin one last time as they walk away, smiling.

What Eren doesn't know is that Grisha is drenched in nervous sweat.

Armin is older.

Older, wiser, about 60 times bigger than what he was at ten years old thanks to the colossal titan.

And...

The world shifts around him. He is on top of his colossal titan, battling Eren who is trying to get back to his worm to restart the rumbling after his nape was blown up. Annie, Pieck and Reiner try their best to fight off the eldians who were turned into titans.

Connie, Gabi and Jean among them.

Armin lost sight of them somewhere in the midst of the fight.

"He's in the mouth! I'll do it!" Mikasa yells suddenly. Armin looks at her, she jumps down from Falcos titan. She and Levi take off towards Eren's colossal titan, it doesn't take a genius to guess what she means. Tears well up in Armin's eyes but he persists.

He uses his colossal power to put more distance between Eren and this worm being. They fight hand to hand. Until Levi fires a thunderspear and breaks Eren's teeth. Mikasa jumps in.

Armin's heart skips a beat.

As if time is frozen for a few seconds, nothing happens. Armin blinks in surprise, he stares into Eren's titan eyes.

Then--

Eren lets out another roar of anger. As if his power had multiplied, he pushed Armin away like he weighed nothing. Armin fought but Eren was insanely stronger, after a few punches to Armin's head, he completely lost mobility.

Armin's titan falls down. Eren's titan is the one that stands tall and looks down at Armin's steaming titan like he's less than dirt.

Armin closes his eyes and embraces the ground. No matter how much he forces his titan body to move, it simply won't. Too much tension on it has caused his spinal cords to collapse. And unless Armin makes another titan body, this one is useless.

Armin's titan body starts to steam. But he looks up at Eren, waiting for his next move.

He does something Armin can never forget.

He spits Mikasa's body out.

Armin's eyes follow her body as she plummets to the ground.

Eren is two steps away from the worm being, he kicks Reiner away and he's met his goal.

Yellow lightning engulfs the area. It's enough to blinden Armin momentarily. The steam that rises from the body is enough to knock the breath out of any human.

And the sight of the skeletons of the founding titan is enough to make everyone's heart give up on hope.

With Eren's scream, the titans continue their march.

THUMP .

They crush humans and pure titans alike. For most, it's a choice of whether wanting to be alive or crushed.

(What lovely choices.)

THUMP .

Armin detaches himself from the steaming body of his colossal. His feet shake as he stands up and tries to run. Run towards where he saw Mikasa fall. He prayed to whoever was listening that what his rational mind was telling him was not true.

THUMP.

THUMP.

He runs with shaking feet and wavering thoughts.

He falls to his knees when he sees a woman on the dirt. It takes a few moments for his tired mind to realize this is Mikasa covered in grime and dirt and spit and the blade she had taken to kill Eren in her own abdomen. She is facing the ground

She isn't breathing.

She isn't bleeding.

THUMP.

THUMP.

Armin's hands shake as he puts it on her shoulder. "Mi-kasa?" he chokes, on the sight. It takes his entire mindfulness not to vomit.

He touched Mikasa's shoulder and the slimy substance on it. She pushed her on her back.

It takes only one look.

Her eyes are staring without seeing.

Lifeless.

THUMP.

THUMP.

THUMP.

Armin looks at the approaching sound of death. The colossal titans that are getting closer and closer and somehow, his mind can't bring itself to care.

He hasn't seen Reiner, Pieck or Annie since Eren reunited with the worm. Safe to say the steaming piles under the footprints of colossal titans aren't just pure titans and humans.

pure titans. ..

Armin looks at what's in front of him.

THUMP.

THUMP.

THUMP.

He wonders if he himself was this huge in the colossal titan. If he himself shared such a dangerous aura of death.

Armin stares as they come closer.

He watches human after human, titan after titan, and life after life being crushed under the colossals heels. A titan with a strange significance to Jean's face also gets trapped under the titans heels.

Armin closes his eyes with a sigh, his heart too numb to care anymore.

THUMP.

THUMP.

THUMP.

His time is coming.

All his comrades have died. And right now, the colossals are close enough that with two more steps, he'll be crushed.

What a life.

Armin looks down. He ignores the colossals footsteps for a small moment just to put his hand over Mikasa's open eyelids and slide them closed.

THUMP.

THUMP.

THUMP.

Shadows rise and swallow Armin's body whole. When Armin looks up, there is a colossal foot right above his head. All he can do is close his eyes and accept his fate.

But fate laughs and doesn't come.

The colossals footsteps stop inches away from Armin's head.

What comes for him are hands made of bones. They pick Armin up like the founding titan is picking up a delicate flower. Armin's body no longer obeys him. He stays still in Eren's hold, not even the thought of rebellion passes his mind.

Eren's titan hands cradle him in their secure hold.

Armin is too exhausted to fight him, to transform, or to even laugh at the irony. He can only see the world being crushed from between Eren's bony fingers.

The only answer he can find for this passiveness is that Eren has altered his mind so he won't think of defying him again.

Armin tries to move. He fails.

To stand up, he fails.

His body no longer obeys him. He can just lay on Eren's bones and let him do as he pleased. Armin, with all the powers of the colossal, is still an Eldian. Eren owns his body and his mind.

A single tear falls from Armin's eyes.

His eyes fall closed, pulling him into unconsciousness.

The next moment he opens his eyes, he is in a cell back in Paradise island.

His eyes are heavy.

And painful.

Armin wants to lean up, he expects the chains around his hands to rattle and their sounds to echo in his cell.

Darkness.

Silence.

And the heavy throb of Armin's heart.

It was beating strangely.

(Armin doesn't like to think he has sacrificed his heart for having this second chance. He's surprised he even has a heart that beats.)

But... Armin opens his eyes with a gasp. He is in no cell, just a cellar that was converted to a refugee center. Armin jumps up, his breathing becoming heavy as he stares at the narrow morning light coming inside the narrow windows. His sleeping place is next to Eren, who is sleeping soundlessly.

When Armin's brain catches up with reality, he feels like he was run over by one of Marley's military cars. The giant kind that was the height of two grown men with a canon sticking out of it.

Oh well, they're probably making one at this moment. What was it called? Uh, a tank.

Armin sits up and his body immediately tenses. Sure, his little ten year old body isn't used to such an extensive amount of stress in such a short time. His muscles ache and needles dance in the palms of his hands.

He can see Eren from the corner of his eyes. His chest is rising and falling so he's alive.

Armin takes a deep breath. The cellar is well lit enough that Armin could see it was morning.

MORNING !

Armin jumps but it results in him falling head first to the ground. He presses the new wound on his forehead as he sits up again. "Doctor... Yeager..." he says through grit teeth. "Gotta find... Doctor... Yeager..."

"Armin! You're awake!"

He feels a tray fall right next to his head. Small but strong hands push him until Armin is laying on his back. Mikasa narrows her eyes

as he taps the new wound on Armin's forehead. "We have to tell Eren's mom about this."

Armin hisses. The wound burns when Mikasa touches it. He brushes the pain aside and tries to sit up. Armin meets her mournful dark eyes, wondering what made her like this. "What's... What's wrong, Mikasa?" he asks.

He shakes his head. First things First.

"Where is Dr Yeager?" he asks, "I really need to talk to him!"

Mikasa's eyes immediately fall to the ground.

Dread closes around Armin's throat.

"If it was last night. You could have talked." she whispers. "But last night... Last night Carla couldn't find Dr Yeager. Keith searched the forest and found-- found Eren unconscious. With some parts-- some parts--"

Mikasa swallows hard. "We can only assume they were attacked by a bear. Eren passed out so the bear didn't touch him."

wait no.

No this-- is this seriously what they came up with??

AM I LATE?

Armin takes a sharp breath. There is no point in guessing games. He jumps back, he crawls up to Eren's sleeping body and looks around his neck.

Armin's blood runs cold when he sees something around Eren's neck.

He jumps, he doesn't realize he pushed Eren's collar down and is yanking the band from around his neck. Praying that it isn't the key

to the basement.

Because if it is...

If it is...

Armin's hands wrap around something cold. A metal. He brings his hands up and sees the key.

There is a key around Eren's neck...

Armin jumps back. His heart falls in his chest and his mind beats him back with curses. Eren sits up and stares at Armin with surprise planted all over his face.

useless!

Armin crawls back, far away from his two friends.

you overslept!

Until his back hits the stone wall.

now Eren has the founding titan!

All hail Carla yeager and the little effect she has on the plot but the tremendous effect she has on Erens attitude.

please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Alone

Chapter 3: Alone

Y'all, guess who has the midterms coming up?

To prepare for the inevitable approach of midterms week and examination, I have decided to post this before I disappear off the grid for a short while.

So, enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The situation with the refugees is as miserable as Armin remembers it to be the first time around. Dirty, loud, hopeless.

Plagued with Hunger and lack of resources.

People die by the second because there aren't enough resources or food to keep the injured alive. The morgue has its hands full.

Armin hides behind the door, sneaking his head just enough to see the men lowering a young man's body into a coffin. Armin narrows his eyes, his hiding place is good enough that the men working around the coffin can't see him.

The moment the two workers leave to bring a parchment to wrap around the body, Armin jumps into action. The dead man has a large bandage wrapped around his head. The stench of death invades his senses and makes him want to poke.

But no, Armin has to do this.

He unwraps the bandage from around the dead man's head and wraps it around his own hand.

He runs away after that. He runs out of the morgue and towards the refugee center. Armin looks back at the body once more. He is dead anyway, it's not like he's going to need that.

Armin rolls the bandage around his hand and leaves the morgue.

He has to pass the refugee center. His little curiosity makes him look inside. He stands up on some boxes and looks inside from a window. Just as he assumed, Carla has taken Eren and Mikasa to a small corner. In their hands were two tiny bowls of stew. Carla watched with an unknown expression on her eyes.

Carla's little help at the hospital gives them some spare food. It's mostly aimed at Eren and Mikasa. Armin doesn't blame Carla for spending the little money she gains on her own two children.

Armin leaves when it's time for Carla to come back. Thankfully, none of them have noticed this but Carla is glad Armin isn't there when she's feeding her children food when a single loaf of bread is hard to find.

Eren once talked about the stew, thinking he eats it when he's out. Carla froze on the spot. Armin didn't want to make himself a new burden so he lied and said it was tasty.

(Because if Eren realizes Armin doesn't eat as much, he won't eat as well. Armin doesn't want that pressure on Carla.)

A loud growl from his own stomach makes him turn around. He hugs the bloodied bandage in his hands and jumps down the box and rushes towards the lake.

He had found a small box and some wood to burn. It was a little trick he learned from Hange in one of the scouting missions outside the

walls. How to disinfect the supplies. He pours some water of that lake into the box and lets it on the burning wood to boil.

First Armin tries to wash off the blood on the lake, he succeeds to a point. He scrubs the blood as much as he can. He scrubs and scrubs and scrubs until the red isn't as angry as it was in the white substance. Then he drops it into the boiling water.

He looks at the sun above himself. He hummed thoughtfully, he had to let it rest in boiling water for half an hour at least.

But how am I going to measure half an hour without a clock?

Armin hugs his knees and rests his head on it. This time, he'd have to rely on his instincts.

Time passes.

Time passes enough that Armin is sick of the sight of the lake. Birds chirp around it and the lack of human activity makes it look bigger than it is.

It reminds him of--

If we kill all our enemies...

... Will we finally be free?

Armin takes a sharp breath and covers his ears. He pushes on his scalp hard enough that it starts to hurt again.

(This looks like something he's doing a lot these days.)

No! Not this time--

I won't let you! I won't--

"Armin?"

Armin lets his hands fall to his sides.

He bites his lips to stop them from trembling. Footsteps follow until Mikasa appears in his field of vision. Half of her face is covered by the scarf, he looks at the boiling water with confusion. "What is this?"

Armin swallows hard. "It's-- It's something I've seen someone do... Someone I know..." is all Armin says.

He picks up a stick and swirls the boiling water like soup. It has to be cleaned completely. He wants to give it to his grandfather.

Mikasa sits next to him. She doesn't say anything, she just hugs her knees and stares at the lake.

She doesn't know how much her mere presence is calming for Armin. It soothes Armin's nerves that have been on fire ever since she was spat out of the founding titans mouth...

... Which will happen about ten years from now.

"How's Eren?" Armin asks. Then immediately regrets every word. Why must everything between the two of them be about Eren?

Mikasa rests her head on her knees. "He was tired." she murmurs. "I let him sleep it out. But he kept asking where you were. He's restless when you're not around, Armin. But he's sleeping for now."

Armin nods, his mind only on the bubbling water. "Good." he hums. "The more he sleeps, the less trouble I'll have."

"Huh?"

Armin slowly shakes his head. "Ah, nothing." he murmurs with a sigh. "It's been about half an hour. The bandage should be disinfected by now."

Armin tries to hold the box and take out the bandage. Somehow he has forgotten the water is boiling. He screams as his hand throbs the

moment he puts it into the water. He hugs his hands and doubles over it, trying not to scream from the pain.

His body truly is a fragile, worthless being.

He stays like that until the waters have cooled down, but his hand was still throbbing.

"Here... Let me... It's for your grandpa, right?"

Armin looks up and sees Mikasa folding the bandage with her hands like it was nothing. She folds it and holds it in her hand away from other infectious substances.

His tiny hands are still aching but he smiles and takes the bandage from Mikasa. Now, the lukewarm water still burns his abused skin but Armin tries to ignore it.

"Thank you, Mikasa." he murmurs, keeping his head low. "Yeah, it was for my grandpa. I'll need to change his bandage soon and I know the government won't give us any."

He whispers the last part so quietly that he isn't sure if he can be heard.

"Armin..."

Armin stops. He meets her eyes with no trace of hatred in his blue orbs. "Yeah, Mikasa?"

"Did you have a nightmare last night?"

Armin blinks in surprise.

Yes?

Except that wasn't a nightmare. It was real life. More real than this world at least. Armin holds the bandage very close to his heart as he

shakes his head. Their deaths were real. The rumbling was real. Marley is real.

Armin swallows hard. "No..." he murmurs back.

Mikasa stands up and narrows her eyes at him. "Then why are you acting like this to Eren? He thinks you hate him." she whispers. "It's bad enough already, Armin. Don't make him sadder."

Armin's jaw falls in shock before he quickly clicks it back in place.

Yes. Mikasa. This Mikasa. Armin had almost forgotten how obsessed with Eren she was. Still is.

How many times have they had this conversation?

Don't tell Eren, it would make him angry.

Don't tell Eren, he has enough on his mind,

Don't tell Eren.

Don't tell Eren.

Don't tell Eren.

Armin's eyes slowly fall to the ground. This is Mikasa. The person who would abandon Armin to save Eren when a cannon is aimed at them. The same Mikasa who waited and watched as Armin got molested in a mission to keep Eren covered.

The same Mikasa who refused to kill Eren to end things for good.

Armin shuts his eyes. "It's-- it's ok, I'm just worried about my grandpa and I--I was afraid he has infections and--" the lies roll down Armin's lips.

He stands up and smiles curtly at Mikasa. "Thanks for helping me out." he murmurs. "I'll go check on my grandpa now."

The tension between them is awkward. Deep down, Armin wants the grown up Mikasa with him. The mikasa that eventually understood Eren isn't a butterfly to protect. The same woman who knew Eren didn't like him and yet--

And yet refused to kill him.

At least that mikasa understood Armin is a human and not just an asset for Eren.

Armin walks away from Mikasa, his eyes are kept solely on the grass he stamps as he walks. Then, he suddenly stops. "By the way... How's Carla?"

Mikasa shrugs, not knowing what to say. "She's fine. The hospital is making her work ungodly hours and doesn't pay well..."

but it's something at least.

Armin nods quietly.

He leaves the lake and the open sky to walk right to the hospital.

A nurse gives him a questioning glare when she takes the bandage from Armin. Armin looks down and lies about having taken it from a volunteer. She doesn't ask any questions. What matters is that there is a new, hopefully clean, bandage around his grandfather's wound. Another step closer to meeting the end of the day.

The nurse wraps it around his grandpa's missing leg and Armin sees no more signs of the amputation bleeding out. His grandfather no longer has a leg from his right knee downwards.

Considering everything, it was a win.

"Oswin Arlert, you are a very lucky person." the nurse tells his grandfather. "Hopefully, you'll be discharged soon enough."

There is no real discharging. Because his grandpa isn't really on a bed, just a thin looking mattress on the ground in a room he shared with ten other patients who looked just as miserable.

The nurse leaves a tray of one loaf of bread and a tiny bowl of stew.

His grandfather looks exhausted. He doesn't have the usual calm in his eyes, and his face is paler than he remembered it to be when he was sent off to be killed in a desperate attempt to get back at Maria.

"Armin, have you eaten something?"

The old man's gentle voice snaps Armin out of his trance. He shakes his head and sits down on the ground. "I'm ok, grandpa. I ate something from--"

A loud growl from his empty stomach interrupts every sweet lie he was about to say.

The old man shakes his head. He holds the loaf of bread with his wrinkled hands towards Armin. "You need to eat something, Armin." he tells him.

Armin pouts. "But grandpa! You need this more than I do."

"No arguing, young man." he tells him.

Armin takes the bread and cuts it in half. He puts the other half on the tray and sinks his teeth into the bread.

His grandpa smiles. "Stubborn, aren't you?" he murmurs, ruffling the boy's hair. "Fine, but then you'll have to eat the stew too."

Armin doesn't have the effort in himself to fight him. The bread he's chewing tastes too sweet to be true. His hunger is all too confusing for him to think about the old man when he's giving up the food himself.

They share the small rations half and half.

When the bowl is empty, Armin realizes what he's done.

He jumps back. "Oh my-- Grandpa I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have taken from your--"

The old man sighs. "No. No. Stop this, you needed it more than I did." he tells him, his tone is serious enough that it tells him there is no room for debate.

Armin's lips start to tremble.

There is something about being taken care of that he always hated. He always hated the pity of others but when it came to his grandfather...

When it came to his grandfather....

He bit his lips to stop it from trembling, he wrapped his hands around his grandfather's neck. "I-- I love you grandpa." Armin mumbles into his chest. "I'm-- I'm so sorry."

His grandfather runs his hand through Armin's blond hair. "Hey, there is no need to apologize. You did nothing wrong." the old man answers back.

Armin holds him tighter.

No way.

This time, he won't lose his grandfather.

"Mikasa!"

Eventually, Armin is kicked out of the hospital. With nothing else to do, his much younger heart longs for his friends. He doesn't have the energy to fight himself so he walks across the refugee center looking for his friends.

"Eren!" he shouts, "Mikasa!"

"Armin!"

Suddenly he's tackled on his back. Armin puts his feet forward to stop himself from falling. Eren's small hands hold him protectively. "Where did you disappear to!" he murmurs, his voice is close to a sob, but of course Eren's pride won't let him actually sob. "I was so worried Armin!"

Mikasa appears in his field of vision too, silently.

Armin clears his throat. "I'm ok, Eren..."

Eren immediately lets go of Armin but spins him around so they are face to face. He shoves a loaf of bread into the blond's hands. "Here. We could take one for you." he murmurs.

Armin looks at the crusty bread in his hands. He blinks in surprise, as far as he remembers, it was always the other way around. Since when is Eren the sentimental one?

Armin holds the loaf for Eren to take it back. "It's ok, Eren." he mumbles. "I ate with my grandpa. You should make what you have last..."

Eren looks at the bread, mumbling something unintelligible as he talks. "We shouldn't even be in this position." he growls. "If only the garrisons had done what they were supposed to!"

"Eren... Not again..." Mikasa sighs.

"Am I wrong?" he snaps. "I don't see how I'm wrong! It was their job to protect us and look! They failed to do their job twice! Who puts refugees in places that have bears! Now Dad is dead!"

Armin slowly shakes his head.

if only you knew what ate your father wasn't a bear.

Armin swallows hard. Well. That would be a revelation for another time.

"Hey, eat up! Titans don't want thin baits!"

The voice breaks through their trio. Eren is on his feet before Armin knows it. His bread slammed to Armin's chest as he walked away. "Who are you calling a bait!" he shouts.

The two garrison soldiers look at him with shock and disgust planted in their eyes.

"We wouldn't be in this mess if you'd done your goddamn jobs!"

"You know nothing little boy!"

"I know more than a bunch of cowardly soldiers!"

The garrison slaps Eren across the face, a small playful slap for an adult but a serious offense to the child that Eren was.

Armin hugs his bread loaf and watches. This time, he doesn't jump to save Eren with sweet words. He lets Eren have the sweet taste of consequence.

"Ereh!!"

Armin closes his eyes, he doesn't stop Mikasa from throwing herself into the line of fire.

Armin opens his lips, reaches his hand and stares at the scene from between his fingers.

His blue eyes stare as the Garrison member Kicks Mikasa while aiming for Eren. Mikasa shielded herself, again.

Do something...

Armin hugs the bread loaf. His limbs are frozen and he watches as his mind keeps calculating his options.

Are they worth it?

Armin shoves the loaf of bread to his pocket and jumps between the two of them and the Garrison. "Please stop." He holds his hands up and stands between the garrisons. His eyes start to plead with the soldiers. "He's just hungry!" he says with a gentle laugh. "We all get that sometimes, right?"

His words get through the soldiers. They step back with an unknown look in their eyes.

"Please, I beg you."

Bowing and bending is instinctual. He lowers his head and bows down in front of the man.

Well. Well. Well.

look how we ended up again.

Bowing your head and licking books to save Ere--

Armin shuts his eyes tightly.

"Alright, Kids... stay out of trouble, or else." The Garrison spits the words and turns around to leave.

Armin stays in his bow, his mind too frozen to understand he has fallen in the same trap.

All of my problems exist because I put you above myself!

Armin fists his hands tightly.

A cold night, Eren, Mikasa and Armin are given only one blanket not to freeze overnight. And that was actually given by Carla by her allowance from the hospital.

Armin remembers the taste of cold ground underneath him, and knows the ache that would sink all the way to his bones with Trost's winter.

(The first king of the walls didn't choose the best of spots when he built his paradise.)

(But of course, he was aiming for his subjects to die. Not to live.)

That night, Mikasa makes a comfortable spot in Eren's right. They had to use each other's warmth to survive the night. Armin knew that. And yet he can't stop his body that flinches away when Eren's fingers touch his shoulder.

He stumbles back and immediately regrets it when cold air freezes his skin over.

Eren and Mikasa watch him, troubled and confused at his reactions. "Armin..." Eren mumbles. "Is everything ok?"

Armin's skin will freeze overnight if he doesn't stay with them. That's how stupidly weak he is.

"Armin... What's wrong with you?" Eren asks then. He knows the brunet's mind, although brilliant, was slow. But he wasn't expecting it to be this slow.

I just wish I could get away from you.

you lure the worst out of me, and I hate that when it comes to you, I can't even fight myself.

Instead, Armin shuts his eyes. The cold wins.

He reminds himself of a scared animal that doesn't have any better options other than wishing mercy from the hunters.

He stays completely still as Eren pulls him to his left and pushes him under the blanket.

They are warm.

And comfortable.

Eren pulls him closer, and leans his head on Armin's shoulders.

Deja-vu hits Armin like a tidal wave of the ocean.

Eren's embrace reminds Armin of all those years ago. When Eren's hand held warmth and not danger. When he was a boy and not the carrier of two thousand years of sins. When the two of them had the privilege of being lost in their own little world instead of having a burden on their shoulders.

(Is this how Eren felt? When he got the memories of the future?)

Will he be different this time? Can I save him? Save us?

Armin flinches at the thought.

He had promised himself he wouldn't fall into the trap laid in Eren's eyes. He won't fall for him. He won't let his emotions get the better of him.

Because this Eren Yeager might be worth sacrificing all the world for,
But Eren Yeager of the future will stab his heart and leave him
bleeding on the cold hard ground without a second of remorse.

Because Eren's first love will never be Armin. Or Mikasa. It'll be
fighting, Violence, and *freedom* .

Eren's hands pull him closer to his side. Armin looks up at his sleeping face.

All these rational thoughts leave his brain.

He is just tired.

Eren feels warm.

Eren feels safe.

One of the major differences between these two timelines, other than Carla's survival and her reassuring presence, is the fact that his grandfather was almost devoured and somehow miraculously alive.

But missing a leg.

It's something Armin prays and thanks whatever force granted him with this unspoken wish every night when he falls asleep next to his grandfather's hospital mattress. His absence in the field, however, means that he can't help them out in the fields of endless snow and cold hands that they must somehow force to bear some food.

Armin remembers this time from their first time around. They never yielded to any of the plants. No crops could grow in that cold. They never will. This frozen land on top of the mountains and this time of the winter is highly unlikely.

And it's no difference.

Eren, Mikasa and Armin still work. They still return with splinted hands and bruised faces and aching muscles. Carla spends her time in the hospitals to get some hard earned money. Armin barely sees her, but that money is the blanket they wrap around themselves and the food and medicine that stops Eren and Mikasa from going hungry. Armin doesn't comment on it. They spend the night in the cold hard ground of the cellar but at least they have each other's warmth.

One day, after an especially tiring day at the work field, Armin collapses on the ground the moment they reach the refugee center again. Eren kneels down next to him. "Armin!" he says. Armin is too weakened to fight Eren as he cradles him in his arms. "... You shouldn't go so hard on yourself."

Armin ignores it. He tries to stand up again but fails. He falls right into the ground, Eren's gentle hands help him up.

"I'm alright..." Armin mutters, gulping the lump in his throat. "I'm ok..."

Mikasa sits down, she hugs her knees and doesn't say a word.

It takes a few hours for Armin to stand up on his feet again, and the first thing that crosses his mind is to go visit his grandfather.

Eren jumps and holds his hands up in a T to stop Armin from walking out. "No!" he shouts. "Armin, you're exhausted!"

Armin huffs angrily. "I don't need you to protect me!" he snaps. "Nothing will happen! Don't worry!"

"Then I'll come with you, I won't let you go alone!" he says.

"Eren I-" Armin narrows his eyes angrily. He turns his head and walks away. "Just don't make yourself known too much." he growls angrily. Eren accepts the deal.

Eren holds his promise for the most part.

He stays utterly silent and follows Armin like a shadow. He goes to the usual room but doesn't find his grandpa on the usual mattress two steps away from the corner. In his usual spot is a little girl.

Armin's heart skips a beat, he grabs the nearest nurse's sleeve and brings up the best innocent child voice he could. "Miss nurse!-- please, where is my grandfather??"

She looks around a few times and stares at the mattress that the old man was usually on.

please...

It's not acting anymore. Armin's heart is beating maddeningly in his chest. Would they take away his grandpa if he died without telling him? What would they do?

Where is he? Did they bury him already?

"Don't worry. He's still alive. Your grandfather has an infection, and Gangrene, I can't let you visit him now." the nurse says.

The words crush Armin's hopes and twists his younger heart like nothing ever did. "Tell- Tell me the truth, is he- is he dying?" he stutters.

The nurse doesn't say anything. Her eyebrows frown and she excuses herself. She pushes them away from the hospital and closes the door.

Armin wants to sneak inside the room and check on his grandfather with his own eyes. He walks to the door but Eren's firm hands stop him from twisting the handle.

"Armin," he says, putting himself between Armin and the door. "Didn't you hear! She said it was dangerous for you here!"

"Don't worry! Nothing will happen to me!" Armin steps closer, he tries to push Eren away but Eren's stands there firmly, frowning and biting his lip. "No! I won't let you go into danger like that!"

"This is none of your business!" Armin shouts.

He immediately slaps a hand over his mouth, realizing what he had done. The sound immediately grabs another guard's attention. The man in MP Uniform immediately comes in their direction. "Oi! What are you two kids doing there?"

Eren takes his hand by his wrist, his hold is urgent and he yanks Armin's hand so the other would follow him.

Armin doesn't run after him.

But Eren is more than ok with pulling him away from danger.

The operation of hope is a go.

Armin lost track of how many times he fidgeted around the hospital room. And how his shoulders fell in relief when they deemed his grandfather "too ill and too old" to participate in this operation. His worries don't disappear however because last time he saw his grandfather, his right leg was amputated above the knee and they were currently hoping Gangrene wouldn't go further.

(Such perfect medical conditions, Armin thinks sarcastically.)

Last time he saw his grandfather, he put his own worn out hat on Armin's head. The gesture scared Armin for a second but the old man promised to stay alive.

Armin chooses to believe him.

Carla already was a nurse in the hospital so they spared her from the mission. And his grandfather was deemed too much of a burden to take to the mission. Armin can't be happier about that.

That leaves Armin, Eren and Mikasa in a moment of silence. The effect of taking so many people out of the equation was simple. It left the three of them with more room, more food, and more air to breathe.

It gave them the privacy they have here. In this small dead end. Armin leans against the wall and slides down until he's sitting on the ground, hugging his grandfather's hat.

Eren and Mikasa exchange a look, as if debating with themselves as to whether to let Armin in on a secret or not. In the end, whatever opinion he had, Eren won.

Eren sat down next to Armin, his jade green eyes sparkled with mischief. "Armin... Can you keep a secret?"

Armin arches an eyebrow. "What? A secret?" he mumbles.

Eren nods his head. "I'm joining the cadets." Eren says. "I'm gonna get trained and kill those titans by joining the scouts."

Armin's eyes widened. Eren is... So happy when he says that. Last time, he was angry and fueled with anger. This time, his eyes sparkle.

"I'm gonna be strong enough to destroy the titans! Then we can travel the world!" he promises, much more lighthearted and hopeful than last time.

Mikasa stares at him, almost blankly other than the obvious worry in her eyes. "Your mother won't let you."

Eren shoots her a disgusted look. "I won't tell her, of course, duh." he shoots back.

Armin hugs his grandfather's hat tighter.

Honestly, Eren can go in this suicide mission all he wants. He has a titan after all, even if he doesn't know it yet.

Armin wants nothing else than to curl into a ball and wait for his grandfather to be healthy again. But the images of the other timeline won't leave his mind at ease. He knows who the titans are. He knows who the enemy is. He knows all about Marley and the warriors.

He also knows when they will attack. If he doesn't do anything, all those who lose their life will be Armin's fault as well.

Armin swallows hard. Besides, now that his grandfather is alive and well, he'll need money. Armin can put aside his soldiers allowance, anything will be better than this refugee camp once he gets discharged from the hospital

(If he doesn't die)

"I'm coming too." he says finally, looking up at the two.

Eren immediately pales. He holds his hands up and narrows his eyes. "No way, Armin! Who will take care of your grandpa? Or my mom? No offense but you're too physically for a soldiers--"

Armin raises an eyebrow. Hearing those words from Eren is new. Armin is shocked his heart is a little broken from those words. Why does he care? It's not the first time Eren highlights Armin's weaknesses.

"We'll I'm gonna! Like it or not!" Armin interrupts him before he can say anything else. "Besides! We need a soldier's allowance if we want my grandpa and Carla to have a suitable place to live around here."

Mikasa blinks in surprise. "Oh... I... I didn't think about that." she hums. "Then I'm coming too."

Eren rolls his eyes. "Can't I go somewhere without you?" he snaps. Mikasa's shoulders fall and she shakes her head.

This certainly is different from last time...

Armin hugs his grandfather's hat.

He hopes his grandfather survives this time around.

"Grandpa!"

Armin runs inside. As always, Eren follows him like a shadow.

The old man sits up a bit, a smile on his lips. He opens his hands and Armin jumps inside them. His grandfather was finally discharged from the hospital and allowed to see Armin again. Armin wraps his arms around the old man and buries his face in his neck. "Grandpa, I--"

"Hush, I know. It's ok." he assures him.

Eren looks around. He slowly walks away. They were in the middle of the cellar, people were around them. There was no privacy here, but no one was exactly looking.

Armin has forgotten how stubborn his grandfather had been. Of course he'd cling to life. Armin has to have gotten his stubbornness from somewhere. To be fair to Armin, the last time he saw his grandfather was ten years ago.

Or well, Now.

Armin shudders in relief when he remembers that the operation of hope was finished. There was nothing to kill his grandfather now. Or at least he hopes.

"Armin..."

He slowly breaks the hug to look at his grandfather. The old man smiled bitterly. "I... Have something to ask you."

Armin wipes his unshed tears with his sleeve. He smiles awkwardly. "I... What do you wanna know, grandpa?"

"I know you, Armin. I raised you and you can't lie to me. So tell me the truth." he says, an edge of threat to his voice. "Do you want to join the cadets?"

Armin freezes.

He opens his mouth to say something but his mouth fails to form words that would deceive the older man. His grandfather narrows his

eyes at the lack of answer. He slowly shakes his head with a sigh. "It appears I was right in thinking you want to grow up so soon."

"Grandpa, I--" he jumps to speak but his grandfather stops him but puts a heavy hand on his shoulder.

His dark eyes are heavy with regret. His hands squeeze Armin's shoulders. "Armin, are you sure about this?" he asks. "I know I have no better alternatives to give you but are you sure you want to step into such a dangerous path?"

Dangerous path...

Armin looks down, all his remorse washes off his face. He can guess if his grandfather was there the first time around, he would definitely have a heart attack or two when he worried about Armin.

This time...

This time he doesn't intend to let any of that happen. After all, if Ymir was telling the truth and the paths won't let him die, there is nothing that his grandfather has to worry about.

Armin slowly raises his head. "I'm sure, grandpa." he says with the gentlest smile he could. "I know what I'm doing, you shouldn't be worried about me."

"Armin, you are a strong young man but the titans are a different breed of monsters entirely--"

Armin tilts his head. "But Grandpa. The titans will eventually come for us." he says, his eyes wide. "The walls won't stay forever and as long as we stay passive, we're five minutes away from death."

His grandfather sighs loudly. "I know this... But it's not you who has to pay for all this."

in this world most ideal ideas won't work. What matters is that if I don't do anything about the wrongs happening around me, I'll

eventually be hurt.

Now that sounds too grown up for me to actually say it.

Armin puts his hand over his grandfathers. "I know..." he murmurs. "But I want to try my best. There aren't many better options, grandpa." he murmurs the last part.

"It looks like you have made up your mind." the old man murmurs. "Haven't you?"

Armin nods slowly.

His grandfather pulls him into his embrace. He pushes Armin's face under his chin and squeezes his little body. "Guess I'll have to use every second I have left with you, little man."

Armin melts into the embrace, the old man runs his hands through Armin's hair. The act is soothing more than Armin wants to admit.

"You've grown up too soon, Armin."

One year later.

His grandfather walks to the place they'll sign up for their cadet training.

It's almost noon and the place isn't as crowded as it will be in the afternoon, when those from around Trost will arrive.

Armin didn't have the opportunity last time. But this time, His grandfather walks behind him with his cane. Every few steps, he asks whether Armin is sure about this and every time Armin answers him patiently.

He has to do this.

His grandpa has to leave outside the building as he has to sign up his name. A man writes his name, height, hair and eye color on a piece of paper and tells him to go inside a wagon. The old soldier warns him that the next wagon will leave in a few minutes and he has to catch it if he doesn't want to wait until midnight to go with the next.

Armin rushes outside. There is no way he is leaving without a proper goodbye, call him a baby, but he is grateful he has this old man with him now.

His grandfather leans against his cane, his face twists into a frown. "So you're finally leaving."

Armin stands in front of him. He looked away and awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah..." he mumbles. "Goodbye grandpa!" Armin whispers, meeting the old man's eyes. "I'll be back soon the moment we pass the initial stage and get a day off!"

His grandfather's old hands gently pat his hair. "Don't think too much about me. Stay safe." he murmurs, Armin can tell by the way his hands clutch to his tiny figure that his grandfather was insanely worried.

But Armin knew it would be fine.

After all, this world has already gotten ten times better by simply having his grandfather by his side.

Armin steps back. As much as he wants this moment to last forever, it can't. He has to go with that wagon. He can't let the future wait any longer. "Goodbye grandpa." he says, taking another step.

Each step is easier than the previous one. Until he is going back inside and his grandfather is out of view. Armin clutches the cloth above his heart as he walks towards the wooden wagon.

He knows he's leaving his grandpa in a dangerous and unknown position, but he can't postpone the main objective for his mission any longer. He can just hope for the best.

I'll write and visit as soon as I can . He promises himself as he jumps inside the wagon. He sits down. His blue eyes look around. He knows neither of the nervous faces he's sharing a wagon with.

Until he sees two hooded figures and recognises them immediately.

"Mikasa? Eren?" he hums. Both of them turn around. Eren pulls his hood back with a smile. "Hey there, Armin! Did you miss us?"

Armin blinks in surprise. "Why are you hiding like this? Is someone following you?" he asks out of a sense of danger.

Mikasa rolls her eyes. She leans back and crosses her arms over her chest. "No. We're like this because someone doesn't like to talk things through with their mom."

"Woah, Wait! You two didn't tell Carla!" Armin almost screams.

Mikasa and Eren shake their heads in unison. Mikasa is the braver one that pokes her head out of the wagon to see if Carla has followed them or not.

Eren clicks his tongue. "Do we look like idiots or something, Armin? If we had told her, she would have stopped us!"

"Yes! But she's your mother! What if you go and never return!"

Eren hit his fist against his chest. "I'm not planning on dying." he vows. Then a sly smirk appears on his lips, "besides, we have you. I bet you can find a way even if we're literally in a titans mouth."

Armin narrows his eyes with a huff. "Eren you need to--"

"EREN YEAGER!!"

"Oh shit." Eren mumbles. "I bet she has her flip flop in hand already."

Carlas scream echoes all around the carriage and the training center. Mikasa and Eren sit down on the wagon's floor and try to hide away from everyone's vision. Armin wants to join them in their hiding spot too now. Eren and Mikasa grab his elbows and pull him down until he's on the ground with them.

"What the--"

"Hush!" Mikasa snaps.

"EREN YEAGER! MIKASA ACKERMAN! I swear if I find you here, you two are dead!!"

Eren's voice shakes in fear. The three of them are getting nasty and judgemental stares from the other cadets in the wagon.

Thankfully, the wagon starts moving. It starts to move in slow motion until the light of the sun creeps inside and over their head.

Eren sits back with a loud, loud sigh. "Disaster evaded!" he runs a hand through his face. "Can you imagine what would have happened if she had caught us?"

Armin sits up and moves until he's in a more comfortable position. "The titans wouldn't have to worry about you." he says.

Mikasa narrows her eyes. "You're reckless."

Eren huffs. "You're starting to act like my mom again!" he says angrily. "I have one! I don't need you to replace it."

Armin can't stop smiling. This side of Eren... He's missed this crazy adventurous spirit.

Yes, maybe this will work out fine.

The wagon stops in the training grounds and soldiers wearing the cadet Corp emblem welcome them by shouting orders to jump down.

Armin knows the training ground by heart. It's the place he had the most fun in without knowing it. He remembers how stressed he was about everything that would happen here.

This time however, When Armin looked up at the giant ODM gear stands and the flat training ground in front of him, he found his heart at ease. He knows he'll pass. It'll be three years of endless pain and pushing his limits, but he'll pass the training stage and qualify for choosing a regiment.

"Recruits! Everyone will have to pass the initial medical test!"

Armin snaps his head towards the sound. It's an old man, Armin recognises him. He'll be their academic instructor once the first wave of physical training finishes.

"Girls and boys! From two lines and go to your respective doctors." he says. "Girls to the left! Boys to the right."

"See ya." Eren shots at Mikasa dismissively. He throws his hand over Armin's shoulders and shoo's Mikasa away.

Armin raises an eyebrow and Eren is going to act so childish, Armin is starting to think maybe it was better for Eren's maturity if Carla did die.

"Eren. People are staring." Armin mumbles. Armin drags both of them in the long line forming in front of the old wooden building of the infirmary.

Eren hums. "So what?" he asks. "People always stare."

Armin rolls his eyes. He pushes Eren's hands off of his shoulder and turns his back to Eren. His eyes kept firmly over the line. There are a handful of people in front of him, it won't take long.

Thankfully, Eren doesn't push.

It takes less than an hour for Armin's turn. He steps inside the infirmary, inside is as clean and sanitary as he remembers it. They are using a small room, which is painted white, as a room for medical testing.

His young heart is throbbing in his chest. What if something happens and they proclaim him not strong enough to be a soldier? He has eaten considerably less than last time and his hands are more bony and weak, if that's even possible.

The old, bald doctor points at the chair in front of him and Armin sits down too suddenly. The doctor puts his stethoscope in his ears and presses the pad to his chest. "Relax." he orders. "Nothing Will Happen here."

Armin can't take his words seriously.

The doctor tells him to turn around and puts the pad on his back. Armin takes a deep breath and follows the doctor's orders exactly.

In the end, the man puts his stethoscope around his shoulders and orders the nurse to give him a new paper. "You're a little malnourished. But it'll do." he says, holding up the paper so that Armin will take it. "You pass."

Armin sighs in relief. He stands up and takes the paper, a thousand thank you's on his lips as he leaves the infirmary.

Mikasa is already waiting for them, her hands on her hips and a frown on her eyes. "What took you so long? Where is Eren?" she asks.

Armin walks until he's standing next to him. "He's right after me. He should come out in a few minutes." he says dismissively.

Mikasa shuts her eyes for a moment. "Armin." she says, her tone deeper and more tired than it always was.

Armin smiles at her. "Yes, Mikasa?"

"I told Carla. I told Carla we were going to the cadets. I was hoping she could stop us." The confession rolls down Mikasa's lips effortlessly, like she's talking about the weather.

Armin swallows hard. "Oh... I..." he fails to say the words necessary to bend the realities of the situation. "I didn't know."

Mikasa grabs his shoulders, fast and sudden. Her stormy gray eyes shine in the dim light coming from the sun. "Armin... Eren is in denial." she says.

"De--Denial?"

Carla is still alive. So what denial could it be?

Mikasa squeezes his shoulder tighter. "He somehow thinks he can take on the world." she says. "We need to do something before he gets himself killed!"

The tension falls from Armin's shoulders.

"There is no changing him Mikasa..."

Armin swallows the lump in his throat.

How many times did they try to change Eren? Make him charge less into battles he had no hope of winning? How many times did they try to make him see reason?

Countless times.

What makes Armin think it'll be any different this time?

Armin can manipulate the situation so that it'll make it easier for Eren to see reason. But change Eren's world view?

Marley failed. What chance do Eren and Mikasa have?

Mikasa lets go of him and steps back.

They wait in silence. Neither of them have any idea of what they should say to fill in the silence.

They wait.

They wait until the silence has become awkward.

They wait silently until the shadows have become longer.

Armin's test took five minutes. But Eren doesn't come out until half an hour has passed.

When Eren steps out, angry and cursing under his breath, Mikasa jumps to bombard him with questions. "Eren. What took you so long?" Mikasa asks as Eren runs to where the two of them are waiting for him.

Eren pulled his hair back to give that brown jungle a resemblance of order. "I don't have a clue!" he shouts quietly. "The doctor kept changing his ear-thingies because they were broken and couldn't find my heartbeat."

Armin raises an eyebrow. He looks at Eren's body up and down. He finds no new injury. "Oh, you mean stethoscope?" he offers.

Eren shrugs dismissively. "Whatevah!" he says, he puts one hand behind Mikasa and one on Armin to push them out of the doctors office. "How far have we fallen? The doctors can't even find my heartbeats."

Armin rolls his eyes. "Maybe, Maybe that's because you can't stay still!" He points back. "They checked me and Mikasa just fine."

"Oh, Yeah? I would be more worried about the next task if I were you, Armin." he reminds him as he forcefully pushes the two of them out.

Armin stops and pulls away from Eren's hand, he stops pushing Mikasa too. Armin crosses his arms as he stares into the other's jade green eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked. "You think I'm that weak that I can't graduate!"

Eren opens his mouth to say something but then bites back his words in awkwardness. "I uh..."

"He didn't mean that." Mikasa points in. "You know him. He says things he doesn't mean."

Armin bites his lips. He lets it slip.

He doesn't argue when Eren pushes them away and into the training center. Their next stop would be the place to size for their uniforms. Eren is in enough hurry that he's pushing his friends when they stop.

It's all fun and games until the moment Armin raises his head and meets a patch of black hair and a face littered with freckles.

Armin trips on his feet and falls.

"Armin! Are you ok?"

"Did you sprain your leg already?"

But Armin ignores both of their words. He raises his head, his panicked blue eyes search the crowd in front of him. It doesn't take long for Armin's blue eyes to find him again.

There is no mistaking it. The black hair, the brown eyes, the tiny freckles all over his face. Marco sees him staring. He stops and searches his face for a moment.

Out of politeness, Marco smiles and waves.

Armin's body freezes on the ground.

Of course. Of course.

How can he forget?

Someone calls Marco from behind him, his attention quickly goes elsewhere and he forgets about Armin. As he should. He has no idea who he is.

But Armin knows.

Reality falls on Armin's mind like a bucket of cold ice. He has witnessed the death of every single person whom he talked to in the cadet corps. He either caused it or the titans did.

Are you cursed? A small whisper echoes in his mind. *Ah, you should be.*

Armin shuts his ear.

"Armin, Armin! Are you with me?!"

Armin looks up and lets his hands fall to his sides. Eren's jade green eyes search Armin's body for an injury. "What happened? Did you see one of your bullies?"

what?

Armin stands up on his shaking feet, he dusts off his pants and shakes his head. "No. And no, I'm fine." he tells him. "Let's get a uniform before they run out of our sizes."

Eren agrees.

Just like last time, Eren's overjoyed self stood on the first row of endless cadets. Mikasa and Armin followed him and ended up in the

front row as well. Armin's pride takes a hit when he has to wear a uniform one size smaller than the previous time.

However, he knows the worst part is waiting for them. Other than the fun times he had with Jean, Sasha and Connie, and his other friends, the real deal is training with none other than the former commander of the scouts, Keith Shadis. Armin remembers what a nightmare it was dealing with commandant shadis.

He sneaks a look at Eren and Mikasa. Mikasa looks as stoic and emotionless as ever. Armin wonders if it's her Ackerman instincts that makes her so detached or just her personality. Eren looks serious but if someone looks carefully enough, He can see the smirk on his lips.

Shadis walks up the steps, he stands on the small podium and looks at every soul he can. His eyes land on Eren with a surprise he doesn't show.

"MY NAME IS KEITH SHADIS!"

Eren's serious smile slips right off of his face. "You have gotta be kidding." he whispers. "Mom definitely knows now."

Armin stops himself from laughing right in time.

Poor Eren XD

Armin is going to have a field day trying to work his emotions around the warriors and Eren, lol.

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy! (Know that Behind the disguise of an AO3 author, I'm a dragon that lives off people's reviews.)

In the dark

Chapter 4: In the dark

Me: *has exams*

Also me: "ya lol, let's post this without preparing the next chapter I don't have time for that."

I just wanted to post this again before I go burry myself under a mountain of work and exams. Thank you all who wished me well for my midterms! There are still more to do but this chapter was almost done so I posted it.

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

minor gun violence and being fatally shot. (Why am I even putting this here? Its aot.)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Now that Shadis has all the new cadets lined up, he will start breaking their resolve and confidence. He starts from the first person in the line. He screams at the cadet to introduce himself and his district.

The ruthless sun above his head is making Armin's skull boil, although he's sure it's partially due to his stress.

Until, Shadis stands in front of Armin.

And Armin sees nothing but the shadis who tried and failed to be someone special.

When Armin rememebrs that, all thr stress in his body leaves him in an instant. This Shadis is nothing but a facade made to make these Recruits the best they can be by breaking their over confident spirit.

Armin is well acquired with this technique.

They used to call (or will call) Armin a master manipulator not so long ago. They soon will again. Now, the people around him have no clue what hides behind his innocent eyes and thought process. So he knows what Shadis is up to.

Armin keeps his glare, meeting Shadis' eyes with clear indifference. Not hatred, not bravery, simple and serious apathy. His blue eyes stay emotionless as Shadis stares at him for a fraction of a second.

Armin doesn't show it, but it breaks his heart when Shadis leaves him and walks to the next, screaming the good old "we'll use you as bait" mantra at another poor recruit who's shaking on his feet.

Armin sighs the breath he didn't know he was holding.

"Day one starts from now, I guess." he mumbles outloud.

Now... The problem still stands. Reiner, Annie and Berthold are still somewhere in this line with people they are ought to kill. No, they *will* kill them. Not so long from now, in three years, Berthold will stand on his colossal titan and kick down the wall and cause the death of more than a half of recruits of the 104th. Not to mention a large fraction of the garrison forces.

(Just like how Armin blew up that port in liberio and killed almost everyone who resided in the area. Eldian and Marleyan.)

Armin fists his hands when remembering those times. He can blame it on this war all he wants, the blame certainly does fall on Eren and

the yeagerists but Armin was the one who conducted the plan. The one who volunteered to do it. He isn't much different from Berthold.

Armin tries to stay as still as he can. He tries to ignore Eren's worried side eyes he's sending him. Since when can Eren read him so plainly?

Eren takes a deep breath.

Maybe...

Maybe if he stops the bloodshed on both sides...

People would be more ready to forgive eachother and just *talk* .

Maybe I'll be more successful in making both Paradise and Marley listen to reason if the paradisiens hadn't seen their family be eaten and the Marleyans hadn't been crushed under Colossal heels.

Armin bites his dried lips. That sounds like a sound plan except for one minor detail and that's *how*?

Reiner, Annie and Berthold outclass his, Eren and Mikasa's powerlevels by tons! There is no way others would believe him if he said "yeah, remember that titan who broke down the wall? It was this twelve yearold and he was not even ten at the time."

No one would believe him.

Not a single soul.

Eren will believe you . A small part of his mind offers, it makes an unwanted warmth spread through his chest.

Armin takes a deep breath. He slowly turns around, just enough that he wouldn't be caught staring and turns towards where Eren was, right next to him. Eren is already staring, blatantly and obviously. He hasn't bothered to hide it. His jade green eyes focus on Armin's face

like he's a book written in a foreign language. A book he's trying to enjoy.

"Stop staring." Armin mumbles, then looks forward again, not even bothering to look at Eren from the corner of his eyes.

No.

Involving Eren will just make it harder.

Armin slowly closes his eyes.

I came here to save Eren from his fate... Along with others... Not to involve him in my misery.

at least I have a goal now. Stop Berthold from kicking the wall in Trost, no matter what.

things can go forward from there .

"Nah, the colossal didn't have skin. Just muscles." Eren says. He slowly spins his stew with his spoon. Armin flips a book he stole from the library in the other table. He gives half a mind to the conversation and the rest of his focus is on the book and all it explained about the scout regiment current and previous discoveries.

(As he expected. The books have nothing. Zilch.)

"And he was a few meters taller than the walls." Eren says, looking up to meet Connie and his curious gaze.

Then he turned to Mina Carolina. "No, he wasn't that big. Who told you the colossal was big enough to just step over the walls?" Eren murmurs, looking at Mina thoughtfully. "Don't you think he would have kicked the other walls too if he could cross the walls that easily?"

Mina plays with her hair, she throws one of her pigtails to her back. "You... You're right." she hums. "I... Dunno why I thought it'd be like that."

"Oh! Oh! Eren. Did the titans really eat humans like we eat our food?"

Eren's spoon falls into his stew with a loud clack sound.

It is enough to shock the dining area to silence. Armin tears his eyes away from the book to look at Eren and his reactions. His eyes are blown wide, unfocused. His jade green eyes shake as if he's seeing the scenary all over again.

Connie gets his mistake. He steps back and rubs the back of his neck awkwardly, before he knows it, Armin is glaring daggers at Connie.

Eren slowly shuts his mouth and shakes his head. "Yeah, they eat humans. And they would have eaten my mother if it wasn't for Armin."

Suddenly, all the eyes that were previously on Eren, turn to Armin. Armin shuts the book and puts it away, he offers everyone an awkward smile. "I just rolled off the rock so his mom could escape." he offers as an explanation.

Eren threads his fingers together, a wicked smile on his face. "Those idiot titans." he hums, his eyes held the same madness it always did. "They don't stand the chance. Just wait until we master ODM and then..."

A small laugh echoes in the room.

Connie turns around, an eyebrow raised. Everyone follow his gaze and their eyes focus on Jeans face. Armin looses all intrest in the book he was reading and looks, almost dumbfounded, at Jean.

Armin's heart starts beating in his chest because Jean's titan, the pure titan he was the last moments he was alive, has a strange resemblance to this younger face. The same face, the same large eyes, even the uneven haircut.

Armin chokes, the memories of that time invade his mind and blind his senses. All he can hear is the roar of Jean's titan.

Or Jean and Connie's face when they had to abandon them behind.

Armin fists his hands.

Not again.

Never again.

Eren stands up.

"You have something to laugh about?" he asks as he walks a few steps away from their table.

Armin narrows his eyes at Jean.

Jean leans his head against his hand. "Not really. You can tell all this as much as you want, but you'll just as scared as the rest of us." he says with an uncaring shrug. He stands up and Jean drums his fingers against the table. "Even you want to have a safe life in the interior."

Armin smiles, only one side of his face pulls into a smile. It's strange to imagine Jean so... Small. Jean was famous for his height. There were rumors that he was the tallest person in the entire Scouts.

(Well, second only to Yelena.)

Now, he's still tall. But shorter than Reiner, Berthold, Marco, their height difference with Eren isn't even noticeable. How people grow...

Eren narrows his eyes. "Two years ago, this was the interior."

Armin looks at the two of them from the corner of his eyes. It was hard to believe such a hardcore... What should Armin call it?... Such a hardcore partnership starts with these bickerings.

Armin hugs the book tighter. His eyes focus on Jean's face over the very heavy silence that has settled between the two.

Jean...

The same Jean who had trouble triggering the explosion of Eren's founding titan. Now he stands with a confident smirk over his lips, ready to start a fight.

It goes exactly like Armin remembers it to. Jean and Eren stand in front of each other for half a minute, Jean with his usual smirk and Eren with a frown.

The bell rings.

Armin breathes out, he didn't know he was so invested in their challenges.

Jean chuckles. He holds up his hand, his face slowly forms into a genuine but apologetic smile. "Let's not have a rocky start." he says. He holds his hand up for Eren to shake or high five.

Eren stares at it for a moment.

Then he hits his hand.

Eren turns around around and leaves, so it's truce.

Armin wishes it would remain that way.

Eren walks away and Mikasa stands up to walk after him. She sends Armin one last glance and leaves. Armin wants to stay for now, maybe the silence of the cabin would open his mind somehow.

He opens the book again and stares at the picture. The pictures of what these poor paradisian souls assumed made up the titans.

Armin rests his hand on his fists and huffs angrily. The first king really did want all his subjects to just die out in a horrible way when he took every fighting chance they had away from them.

Armin pushes his hair out of his face. He used to love this bobcut but now, it just feels heavy and unneeded.

"Please wait--"

Armin's ears turn sharp.

Oh... Right...

This scenario is the same night Jean explained to him a thousand times. All the times Armin tried to push it in Jeans head that Mikasa wasn't going to move on from Eren. And most times he got was silence from Jeans part.

The times he did talk, mostly when they were drunk with Sasha and Connie somewhere in the capital after visiting Historia, he would explain how he thought she had beautiful black hair at first, then that snow made an avalanche he had no hope of stopping.

Armin turns around. He pushes the memories of another life to the back of his head and watches Jean stutter through the words.

"You have very nice black hair."

Armin can't help but chuckle. Jean is stuttering and mumbling and his face is painted a gentle blush of red. Mikasa on the otherhand, is completely unphased.

Her eyes look Jean up and down for a moment and she nods curtly afterwards. "Thanks." she says and walks out of the cabin.

Jean, as struck as he is, fails to move until she is out of the cabin. He runs after her and outside the cabin.

Armin wonders if he should add saving Jean from this unrequited love from into his to-do list. He shruggs it off. He has bigger things to worry about.

Like how convincing his instructor that Titans nervous systems don't start at their brains but in their nape.

"AAH! What did you wipe on me!"

"My faith in humanity."

Armin chuckles.

His attention quickly falls back on the information on the book. He wants to keep his mind ready and open for any new ideas he might have on how to handle the warriors. Thankfully he hasn't crossed paths with any of them. Not yet. But he soon will, once Eren fails ODM and asks for Reiner and Bertholds help.

Armin reads and reads and reads through the pages his mind fills up with information about titan physiology more than he needs to. But he needs to keep his mind thinking otherwise he'll fall into an endless spiral of memeories from the other timeline.

He can wallow in them when he's dead.

He stands up.

He shoves a piece of bread into his mouth from the table and walks out. He hugs the book and makes sure the bread crust doesn't fall on the pages.

He's tired.

Besides, there is no need to hurry!

Just as he imagined, the next day when the ODM training starts, Eren is the first one to fall upside down.

When Armin himself is dangling from the ODM stand, his little body feels too weak. It feels too tense over the cables. He looks at the instructor for some guidance and he just nods. Armin holds his hands up and the cables push him upwards.

Unlike Eren, he has a working gear and he stays up with little problem. His feet leave the ground. The excitement leaves him high, a childish smile takes over him until he feels his feet on the ground again.

He takes a deep breath. The instructor shouts at him to change spots with the next recruit and he does so. He walks out and puts his hands on his hips. *Now where did Eren and Mikasa disappear to?*

"Oi! Yeager! Get up! Is it too hard for you?"

Armin changes direction towards the sound. He makes his way through the crowd standing on one of the ODM training posts. He pushes people until he's standing on the first row and gets the view of Eren upside down.

Eren hangs limply, frozen in shock more than anything else. Shadis leans down and shouts orders for him to get up. With a threat that if he doesn't, he'll be sent to the fields tomorrow.

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line.

Eren disconnects his belt and scrambles up to try again. He reconnects the belt to the post and nods at the other instructor to pull him up.

Their eyes meet, Armin sees shock and determination in jade green eyes.

Eren tries to keep their eyecontact. But he can't. He falls down and hangs upside down again with an angry cry.

Armin unconsciously touches his own belt.

He can easily tell him to swap belts. Eren's belt is broken after all. Broken by none other than Keith Shadis. If they change, it'll be good.

But Armin doesn't.

He wets his lips and watches Eren get up and try again. And again, and again. And again.

The point is... Armin likes seeing him suffering like this.

He watches with a smirk on his lips when Eren falls for a fifth time.

He isn't smiling when Eren hits his head to the hard ground in the sixth time and has to be taken to the medical wing. He not only hit the ground, but also needed stitches for the wounds he made for himself on his chest.

"I don't know! It's just not working!"

Everyone had left the training ground

Armin doesn't understand why the fact that only Eren nearly failed this task didn't get his attention the first time around.

The training ground is empty. Eren fumbles with the belt and the wires to pull himself up the post. "It's just not working. If i don't do it, I'll be sent to the fields!" he murmurs. "I can't go to the fields."

"Maybe you should." Mikasa offers. "Not everyone is cut to be a soldier."

Armin doesn't comment on it. After all this time, he knows pulling Eren out when he wants to drown himself is useless.

"I'll just try a few more times."

"You can, Eren. Even I could do it!" Armin adds as an encouragement.

He laughs internally.

Hilarious. This is the perfect revenge for Eren calling him weak a few months ago when they talked about signing up to the cadets.

Armin pulls the gears. It takes a little effort but soon, Eren is slowly being lifted above the ground.

And falls.

His forehead hits the ground with a loud thud.

Then, the soil turns color into a deep red.

Both Mikasa and Armin jump to lift Eren up. His jade eyes had rolled back to the back of his head. There was a deep, bleeding scar on the right side of his forehead.

Armin panics. Mikasa picks him up and Armin takes his left shoulder and they both carry Eren into the infirmary.

A small infirmary that hosts only a nurse and three bed. The petite nurse gasps when she sees Eren's face drenched in blood. Mikasa puts him on the bed and whispers sweet nothings as Armin explains what happened to the nurse.

She wraps Eren's head up with a bandage and calls the doctor in.

When the old man arrives, hours have past. Mikasa hasn't moved from Eren's side and Armin can't take his eyes off of him.

The doctor recognises Armin from earlier. "Wow... Seriously." he says as he moves above Eren's bed. He opens Eren's eyes and hums thoughtfully. "I'm guessing this boys trouble, aint he?"

"You won't believe..." Armin sighs loudly, running a hand through his face.

"You. Leave the room." the doctor says, looking directly at Mikasa. "I'm assuming he tore his earlier stitches so I have to do them again."

Mikasa stands up, the chair flies away with the force of her sudden movement. "No! I won't!"

"I'm not debating on this, Miss." he says, an edge of threat to his voice.

Armin held his hand up, trying to calm her down with a gentle smile. "Don't worry, Mikasa, I'm here." he says.

Mikasa curses under her breath. "I'll be outside." she says. She makes sure to stomp her feet as she goes outside.

Armin raises an eyebrow. Since when are Eren and Mikasa so childlike?

Then the answer hits him, Carlas still alive. They are safe from the trauma and aftermaths of their parents' deaths.

The moment Mikasa is out of the room, the doctor takes off Eren's shirt and clicks his tongue at the teared stitches on his chest and shoulders. Armin does everything the doctor asks from bringing clean bandages to keep Eren steady. Until the doctor points at a storage room and tells Armin to bring a syringe.

Armin does, he moves to the dusty storage room and opens the door. It takes a few minutes for Armin to realize the metal boxes on the right each contain a syringe. Armin stares at it for a moment.

His options might not be great but he can use a clear syringe to pull spinal fluid out of a titan shifter and make a pure titan serum.

So Armin picks two.

He shoves one syringe into his pocket and tries to act as discreet as possible.

The doctor won't notice an empty syringe is missing.

He puts the other in the nurses hands and he fills it up with a potent painkiller. He holds Eren down as the doctor injects it into his veins. "If you keep working here, I might even sign you up for medical school!" The doctor jokes as he writes on his notes. He prescribes something for Eren and gives the paper to Armin.

Armin looks down and realises he understands nothing of the doctors illegible handwriting. It's apparently obvious in his face because the doctor laughs and pats him in the back. "Don't worry! The phrmascist will understand!" he says. "Just give it to your friend two times a day for a week and he'll be alright."

Armin hums. "I'm not his mom. He can do it him--"

He turns his head and looks at Eren, who has yet to even wake up from the blow he suffered to his head. "-- Alright, fine." he sighs and takes the paper. "I'll get his medicine."

Just as she has said, Mikasa waits for them right outside of the medical center.

Eren has just woken up but the painkiller is making him talk nonsense. Mikasa takes Eren and doesn't wait for Armin to tell her to take Eren to the boys dorm.

When they are a safe distance away, Armin takes out the syringe box he has stolen. He doesn't want to face the embarrassment of being discovered with a syringe. What would the instructors think of him?

Armin brushed the dust away from the metal box. He smiles to himself as he opens a lid and finds a neat, empty syringe inside with

two needles. "Alright..." he says. "We're all packed."

This syringe might be all he need if he ever wants to make titan serum. After all, Eren is a titan shifter and he can just pull his spinal fluid out and voala! He has a titan serum.

Armin touches his pocket to make sure the syringe is still there. He sighs when he feels the hard steel box.

He watches Mikasa take Eren to the boys dorm. He will have to hide this syringe somewhere no one will find but good enough that he can find it when he needs it.

why would you need a titan serum anyway?

Armin shakes his head. He makes his way back to the dorms.

better safe than sorry.

He doesn't find Eren in their bed when he gets inside the boys dorm.

Instead, he is climbing down the bunk above them with a smile on his face and hope in his eyes. Not to Armin's surprise, Reiner and Berthold are walking After him, an unknown look in their eyes.

Eren jumps when he sees him. He explains, so happily, that Reiner and Berthold will help him get the maneuver gear right.

Of course.

Armin look at Berthold and Reiner as if he's looking at them for the first time. Both look so young, almost babylike. Armin is frozen in space, remembering it was this Berthold who kicked down the wall. The person responsible for his grandpa almost being eaten alive, is none other than Berthold.

Reiner archs an eyebrow. "Well?"

Armin gasps. "Oh, sorry... Im... I'm Armin. Nice to meet you, uhm..."

"Reiner!" Eren says, then points at Berthold, "and his friends Berthold. They sleep in the bunk above us and will help me with maneuver gear!"

Reiner and Berthold sleep in the bunk right above them.

Of course..

That hasn't changed.

Armin tags along them. He walks after Eren as he explains how he asked everyone in the dorm, even Jean, for advice the moment he woke up in his bed. But only Reiner and Berthold accepted to help him.

Eren talked and talked while they wore their uniforms and headed outside. Reiner held a lamp in front of them so they could walk into the forest and up the mountain.

Armin feels the soft breeze over his skin. His senses on high overload, even when he knows nothing will happen. This is Reiner and Berthold, they won't risk their mission by exposing themselves anytime soon.

So they walk. Armin occasionally looks at the moonlight above them and let's the sound of leaves being crushed under their feet soothe his nerves.

The silence lasts until Eren asks the question he shouldn't have asked. "What about you guys... Why did you join the cadets?"

Berthold sighs loudly. "To be honest, I want to join the military police so I wouldn't have to suffer one more day in the lower parts... Of the walls."

There is no such name as "the lower parts" in Paradise. Armin blinks in surprise, because thats probably what they called the place

Berthold lived in Marley...

And this is probably why he joined warrior training.

Armin's eyes soften, his heart clenches almost painfully. He has had Berthold's memory after all, for more time than he was comfortable with.

Reiner stomps his feet over a fragile piece of leaves. "And I... I'm going to return to the hometown that was taken from me." Reiner vows.

Armin feels bad for them.

On top of everything, they must be homesick, regretful and stranded on an island full of people they were taught to hate.

And now... They are helping an entire stranger to get better at killing titans. Armin wants to laugh, is this some sort of atonement? Something to tell their conscience that look! I tried making it better!?

Armin swallows hard. He had almost forgotten what it felt like to be hopeless. The power of the colossal had made him too brave in the future. Now, he has an amputee grandfather that will die if the walls fall again and two friends he wants to protect at all costs.

And a future he wants to guarantee.

A hatred he had forgotten boils in his blood before his mind could relinquish it. His pain is too new, it's still open and bleeding.

(And worst of all, he knows the weight of it all.)

(Isn't that why he wanted to stop the rumbling?)

He follows Reiner and Berthold silently. Towards the height of the mountain.

When the clouds move away, Armin's eyes feast on the beautiful view of Trost.

Armin takes a deep breath and gives them all a fake smile.

Eren tries to keep his balance on that poll until the crack of dawn.

They walk back to the campus. With tired eyes and aching bodies, and of course, no sleep.

Last night, Armin watched him train from high above a tree. He didn't open his mouth once to tell the group about the broken gear. He was debating with himself whether he should stop Eren bonding with them or not.

He eventually let it slip. The warriors influence on Eren is too much to just ignore.

He excuses himself from the other three for a bathroom break. He drops everything in the dorms and throws himself into the bathroom, Armin is lucky that he's alone in the endless sinks of the bathroom.

He lets the water flow into his hands until it's falling from between his fingers. He splashes his face with the ice cold water to wake his nerves. He gasps, the water is colder than he expected it too.

Armin slowly opens his eyes and sees his own reflection into the mirror.

Armin's eyes focus on his own blue orbs. He swallows the lump in his throat, his hand clutches above his heart.

It beats rapidly in his chest.

Armin knows he's not here to play. He narrows his eyes and frowns. He's here to stop a terrible future from happening. He might not know what, or how, he should do it, but he will.

And... He can't do it while being friends with those who will cause so much trauma no matter how much he wants to.

"Put your own humanity aside to win this." Armin tells himself in the mirror. "Sympathy will get you nowhere."

Of course, he is alone. It's just him, his reflection, and his troubling thoughts. He needs to act, and he needs to act against Reiner, Berthold and Annie. He should get comfortable with the idea.

If this means saving Mikasa.

If it means saving Jean and Connie.

If it means saving hundreds of cadets and garrisons who lost their lives after Berthold kicked down the wall in Trost.

If it means stopping Eren from starting the rumbling in a hopeless act.

Armin will do it.

Armin understands and respects Berthold's motivations. More than he ever did. He has a family on Marley that's waiting for him, and Marley won't go easy on them if Berthold fails his mission.

Armin takes a deep breath, his fingers are milked from their color because of how hard he grips the sink.

His mind watches himself in the mirror, and he notices he is cursed just as much as every single paradisian soul in this cruel world. He is stuck here. He is stuck here just as much as he was stuck in paradise when Eren disappeared in Marley.

Because it's in his blood, because he is an island devil.

And the price for Reiner, Berthold and Annie to break out of Marley's brainwashing is just too high. It's Thomas' life. Mina's life. Marco's life. It's *Mikasa and Eren's sanity*. The price of making the warriors

see reason is just too high, but even then, they won't stop working for Marley.

Armin's eyes widen when he realizes his hands are shaking. He holds them up in front of himself and balls them into fists.

Reiner, Berthold and Annie have no other choice but to attack paradise. Marley is their home. Armin understands their motivations and understands he wasn't above them when he attacked Marley.

"But that doesn't mean I'll let it happen again." Armin whispers outloud.

you were my trusted comrades, but now you have to die.

That was exactly what Berthold shouted before he blew everyone to dust. If Armin wants to survive, he'll have to adopt the same ideology.

In the end, he can't take away violence from humans. Armin might as well stop the trauma that was caused by the warriors on them. on Eren. That would be a mercy on both sides.

And who is Berthold, in the grand scheme of things?

Who was Armin? To dictate whether someone could die or not?

Who are you! This isn't how you think!

"That's right! We have the time to talk it through this time!" he says in his own reflection. "Maybe there is no need for all this!"

And something tells Armin he knows exactly who he should start his conversation with.

But not now.

That conversation should be put off until graduation. Let them spend some time with these island devils before tackling their morals.

The next day, Before Eren can wake up or know the reality around him, Armin switches their ODM belts.

Armin decides the brunette has suffered enough. Besides, he got what he wanted. Reiner and Bertholds trust.

Armin isn't interested in chatting with Eren, Reiner or Berthold when Eren finishes his ODM test with flying colors.

(The shock on Eren's face at how easy the task is, is enough to make Armin laugh.)

He has a class after that, a titanology class. Armin thinks it's ridiculous, the amount of misinformation they thought was true is ridiculous. But Armin needs to pass this class for graduation.

When he gets inside, the class room is almost empty. About ten rows of desks and only three people inside, two of them Armin never cared enough to ask their names and the third...

Armin's feet take him to Marco before he can stop himself. The next second, he's standing next to his freckled friend and staring at him like he's seen a ghost.

Marco waits patiently for a hello. He smiles and waves his hand in front of Armin. "Hey, earth to Armin, is something wrong?" he asks.

Armin shakes his head. "I... Uhm... Can I sit here?" he mumbles, too quiet.

Marco's eyes are too kind and too eager. "Of course you can... I might be able to help you, though." he adds with a laugh. "I'm not so good at theoretical studies..."

Armin sits down, he opens his notebook and spins his pen. "It's alright... I'll help you."

"Thank you, so much, Armin. I want to be in the military police, I'm just not good when it comes to studies or keeping my ODM at best condition..." Marco sighs. He looks up at the empty board. "But I'll have to... If I want to be in service of the king, I'll have to get better at all this."

Armin watches the spark in his dark eyes.

The only person who ever wanted to join the MPs because he loved their work was Marco. And he was the only person who didn't have the opportunity to choose.

Armin slowly shakes his head. "I'll... I'll help you." he says with a gentle shrug. "I might not be good physically but I can help you with maintenance of your ODM and studies." he offers.

It's the least he can do.

The spark in Marco's eyes grows. His face beams with a smile. "Really!"

"Sure, why not?" Armin hums.

"Thank you so much! Actually one of my gears is close to being broken can you help me out?"

Armin shrugs. "I'll see what I can do... What happened?"

Marco laughs awkwardly. He explains how he probably broke one of the anchors of his ODM gear when Jean and him were playing around with their new machines. Armin listens to it with his entire being. He doesn't notice as the class slowly fills with people minute by minute.

One of those people are Reiner and Eren. Eren, who is still drowning in the victory of passing the ODM test and Reiner who listens to his rant patiently like an older brother.

Eren hits his fist against his open palm. "Yeah! My ODM felt brand new! Armin must have done something." he says with a smile.

Reiner raises an eyebrow. "You trained all night. Give yourself some credit."

Eren hums thoughtfully. "I heard Armin fumbling with my gear this morning. So I'm pretty sure he did something to make this better for me."

Reiner looks at his wooden dagger. "You trust him that much?"

"He saved my life. I trust him with everything I have." Eren says as if it's the simplest of facts. His jade eyes scan the room until he finds Armin and Marco. He waves Reiner goodbye.

He walks to Armin and hits his back as hard as he could. "Armin!!" he says, pulling Armin from his shoulders. "Guess who passed the test!"

Armin takes a moment to recover from the shock of it. Then he rolls his eyes. "You did." he says.

"Yup!"

Marco nods quickly. "Congratulations, Eren. I knew you could do it." he says softly.

Eren narrows his eyes with a smirk. "So where's horseface? I want payback for all he said last night." he growls.

Marco holds up his hands with an awkward laugh. "Jean decided to uhm... He uhm..."

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. He pushes Eren back and frees himself before muttering: "he'll skip the class, won't he?"

Marco slowly nods.

Before Eren start another ill-intended conversation, the class shoved into silence when the instructor walks in and everyone stand up in his respect.

The old teacher hits his books against the table and pushes his glasses up to his nose. "You can sit down." he says.

Everyone sits down and the lecture begins.

Armin looses his focus on the subject about twenty minutes after the lecture starts. He pushes the pen over his ears and stares at the board without seeing whats on it. Hearing the same incorrect information being taught for the second time is just boring for his overworked mind. Eren and Marco on the other hand, listen carefully and patiently.

It's only a matter of time until Armin's eyes slide across the classroom and into an infamous trio in a corner.

Armin stares at them instead of the black board. His mind starts repeating the same thought process of what should be done about them to stop their attack on Trost three years from now.

If he can do anything at all.

currently, a retaliation from the founding titan is the warriors biggest fear.

Armin rubs his chin. What the instructor was teaching them quickly zones out in his mind. He knows all this anyway. Besides, it's not like getting a high score here will help him in the scouts.

Armin looks at his blank sheet of paper. He leans his head against his fist and lets his mind run loose.

But how?

will it help if the founder threatens them ?

Armin sighs. It's not like it's important unless--

An idea sparks into life like a nuke. Armin smiles widely but quickly covers it with a thoughtful and indifferent gesture.

He has the perfect plan. One that would give Berthold the perfect chance to step back, to reveal what's inside him. If he accepts help from Paradise then it's alright. If he doesn't, then Armin will have no choice but to take him out of the equation.

Although...

Armin narrows his eyes at the group of three in the corner. As far as he remembers, this was the last time they'll act like they're close to each other at all.

They don't look so close. Reiner is making sure Berthold completes his notes and Annie is on her own silently. She looks at the two every once in a while and then goes back to her own work.

But Armin knows better. If he somehow manages to take out Berthold... Then... The two might snap. And in their current situation, the military doesn't have the manpower to kill the female and the armored together.

Armin sighs as he turns back towards Marco. "What I'd do for a thunder spear," he murmurs.

"Uh, did you say something?" Marco asks, an awkward smile on his face. "Sorry I didn't hear you."

Armin snaps his head towards his benchmate. "No! I just think out loud sometimes," Armin whispers.

The instructor suddenly hits his ruler against the table. Armin and Marco tense and look ahead. The angry teacher sends them an angry glare. He talks in small, curt words and keeps on with his lecture.

Armin takes a deep breath.

He'll burn that bridge when he gets to it.

"This is your first mission!"

Armin crosses his hands behind his back and stares at Shadis as he explains the mission to the small group they are. His group was with Eren, Jean, Krista, Mina, Sasha and Marco as the leader.

And of course, given the person with the quickest handwriting, he was chosen to report.

Shadis narrows his eyes at Marco, who is standing right next to Armin. "You will go to the mountains on the other side of the training grounds, get a medal hidden in the station and come back within the estimated time."

Shadis grits his teeth. "In this exercise, you'll learn that a soldier always keeps their guard up!" he sneers. "And if you're caught lacking you will fail this mission!"

"YESSIR!"

"Get to your horses, and listen to your leader, dismissed!"

Armin looks back at their group. Who in their right mind would put Eren and Jean in the same group? Not this Eren and Jean at least.

Marco lets out the tension in his muscle with the form of a loud, painful sigh when Shadis leaves. "Let's go everyone..." he murmurs. "If we want to get to the MP, we'll need this grade."

Armin smiles bitterly. He had almost forgotten how hopeful and dreamy Marco was about the military police.

You'll get to, this time.

I promise, Marco.

"You hear that, suicidal maniac? Imma need this grade!"

"Even more reason for me to make you fail it!" Eren shoots back.
"Who would put you with me! At least they had the mind to put me with Armin."

Marco holds his hands up a little. "Guys please. We need to--"

"Yeah! I agree! I wouldn't you here either. When you want to be titan food, why do you need this training anyway!" Jean snaps.

"Guys... Be friends."

Armin is shocked by the soft voice coming from the corner. Historia smiles at the two, who don't notice her at all. "Guys... We should be friends with eachother." she says again. Eren and Jean don't hear her.

Armin loses his interest in Eren and Jean's conversation. Instead, he just looks at Historia who keeps offering sweet words of friendship to the two who obviously can't hear her at all.

Historia...

No... This is Krista.

This personality is a loud cry for help. One that only Ymir heard.

This is a facade Historia put on herself to make herself the Goddess of 104th. To make herself lovable by most.

And now...

If there is one thing Armin has learnt is that there is no hope of ending a fight with "be friends" or "lets be nice to eachother".

And they can't offer anymore time to senseless fighting. Also, the two are moments away from grabbing eachothers collars and starting a physical fight.

Armin rolls his eyes. He steps forward, between the two and pushes them away with his hands.

Eren immediately steps back, hurt written all over his jade green eyes. Armin looks at him and then at Jean with a silent threat. "You want this score for the MPs, don't you, Jean?" Armin asks. "Then get over this silly chatter." he adds before either of them could protest.

Marco whispers a quiet, "thank you" when Armin steps back.

"Lets... get our horses..." Marco says a little loudly. He is the leader after all, people should hear what he has to say before obeying him.

Jean and Eren send eachother a quick angry glare before they go their separate ways to the stables. Eren waits until he grabs Armin's elbow and pulls him after himself. Armin lets himself be taken.

He can see lonely Historia from the corner of his eyes.... Or should he call her Krista? Yes, he'll call her Krista for now. Because if he doesn't he might slip her name during a conversation. That might be a revelation she isn't ready for.

Armin sighs. He pulls his elbow out of Eren's grip. "I can walk on my own..." he says, glaring at the other angrily. Eren doesn't react.

His fingers slide down until it laces with Armin's fingers.

Armin blinks in surprise. But he doesn't push back when Eren squeezes their hands.

By the time the moon rises, Armin's hand is aching from writing so much of Jean and Eren's mischief over the past 6 hours.

It's almost midnight and they have three campfires ready. Armin is the last to fall asleep. Eren makes his sleeping back and looks at Armin from the corner of his eyes. His sleeping back is exactly next to Armin's. He sits down and slides inside. "Are you ok?" Eren asks before he puts his head on the pillow. "You look pale... Well, paler."

Armin huffs. "No... I'm ok... Also, talk quieter, people are asleep." Armin says, pointing at everyone around them. Eren rolls his eyes and puts his head on the pillow.

"Whatever..." Eren hums. "Wake me up for whatever reason. Even if you don't want to be alone."

Armin raises an eyebrow.

Eren winks at him before he closes his eyes and tries to sleep.

After a few minutes, Eren's breathing evens and Armin realizes he is the last one awake. He hums a gentle rythm to himself and looks up at the moon.

He knows sleep simply won't come to him tonight.

It's been about six months since the start of Cadet training and he sent a letter to his grandpa a few days ago. It'll be a while before he gets a reply.

Armin runs his hand through his blond hair and looks at the moon.

Is founder Ymir watching him?

She should. She should be laughing at her own joke too. Because, why, for the walls sake, is he so far into the past.

And has nothing to do to fix anything.

Pitter... Patter.

Armin tenses up at the sound. He turn around and sees nothing other than a small shadow slowly going towards the forest. The worst case scenario quickly takes his mind hostage until his eyes notice its Krista who is walking away from their camp.

Armin blinks in surprise. He jumps to his feet and minds every step he takes, everyone is sleeping, after all. Armin jumps between brown leaves and his friends sleeping bags towards the forest where Krista disappeared to.

He walks between the branches and pushes flowers. His blood freezes in his viens when he hears a quiet sound of crying. He follows it with a sense of urgency until he gets near a small lake.

He hides behind a tree until the sound of hushed crying quiets down into nothing. Her horse leans it's head near Kristas and that seems to calm her down enough to stop.

Armin watchs her silently for a few seconds. Waiting until she calms down before he makes himself known.

"Krista?" he asks, a little loudly.

Kristas body tenses. She wipes her tears quickly and turns around, her smile shining. "Armin! You're awake too?" she asks. "You should be asleep... We have a long day tomarow..."

Armin's eyes soften. "So should you..."

Krista slowly hums to herself. "I'm... Not tired."

Armin slowly walks towards the lake, his boots get muddy as he gets closer to Historia, who is sitting on a rock. "So uhm... Krista?" Armin murmurs, slowly sitting down on the same rock. "Were you crying?"

Queen Historia Reiss crying?

Armin watchs her with eagles eyes, he had her every reaction under supervision. It was hard to believe the same queen who wanted to

execute him without an ounce of remorse is the sensitive girl right here.

Krista slowly wipes her eyes and laughs, her smile is fake and unbelievably small. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

Armin hums quietly. "You know... It's fine to be sad." he says. "It's an important emotion and... As soldiers... We're going to deal with it alot."

Krista takes a deep breath. "I'm not sad... Not really." she murmurs. "Armin, tell me the truth... Are you here to call me 'fake'?"

Armin blinks in surprise. He points his finger at his own chest and asks. "Me?"

Krista nods and looks away. "Last time I... Laet time I was in a group with Eren, he called my actions 'fake'. And everyone knows Eren's actions are almost always influenced by you."

Eren has what??

Armin holds his hands up. "No! What? No!" he laughs awkwardly. "I would-- I would never--"

Yes. Yes he would.

But Krista doesn't need to know that just yet.

Krista slowly shakes her head. "Ok..." she murmurs.

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. "You know... Something tells me Eren doesn't have that much importance in your eyes. So his words won't make you so emotional."

Krista's eyes widen. "No. Eren is important to me. Everyone is important to me."

"You can speak the truth here, you know, I won't tell anyone."

"I am telling the truth, Armin." Krista repeats. "It's nothing. I'm ok."

Oh no.

Oh no, you're not.

"Then why are you so sad?"

"Is your hobby poking your nose into people's business?" Krista snaps. She immediatly covers her mouth in horror and shakes her head. "So-Sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't want to speak like that."

Half of Armin's lip pulled into a smile. He leans back to his elbows and shrugs. "It's ok, I get that alot. I--"

Click click.

wait...

This mission.

He remembers this mission! They'll be attacked by bandits soon and that sound-- that sound meant someone was near them and they deifintly had a gun.

Armin's eyes shut open. He turns his head around. "KRISTA WATCH OUT!"

BANG

Armin's body hits the mud before his brain recognises the blow to his left shoulder. A side of his face buries itself into the mud and the bullet wound is dangerously close to his neck.

"ARMIN!"

Armin's eyes twitch. His hands shake as he moves it over the wet mud to the wound on his shoulder and chest. He tries to move but his body fails.

His eyelids are heavy.

When his hand finally reaches his chest, it falls on even wetter mud. His fingers touch under his shoulder and meets the wet, slimy feeling of blood under his fingertips.

oh great.

"LET ME GO!"

"If you like your life, you'll keep your mouth shut."

"SAVE HIM! If we don't do something, he'll die!!"

Armin can barely open his eyes. The bloodloss is making itself known by his blurry vision and weak limbs. He can see Kristas silhouette and the men who tied her hands behind her back.

Armin's blue eyes stare at the men.

Did they...

They shot him...

Armin is laying down on the mud, bleeding out his lifes precious blood. The rest of Krista's shouts and the mens growls reach Armin's ears but Armim hears them like it's from the end of a long tunnel.

His eyes fall closes before he can push them open.

He... He did enough.

Armin's mind becomes strangely at peace with the changes he has made. His lips pull into a smile. If he is really dying, Armin can deal with it. His mind quickly loses the ability to feel.

Darkness.

Silence.

The ground underneath him is cold. Not as cold as snow but as cold as soil that has never seen the sun.

Hands touch his hair. Warmth invades his senses in shape of two hands and a warm body Armin can curl next to.

It gives Armin enough strength and curiosity to open his ocean blue eyes.

The hands pull him closer, Armin's mind recovers enough to understand he is lying down on his back and the warmths hands cupping his face and caressing his face with his palms.

Armin can see the blur of a human with chocolate brown hair. When his vision clears, his jade green eyes are the first thing he sees. The mans brown hair is long, his hands are colouses and roughed up. Armin knows it too well. His blood freezes when he recognises Eren and his surrounding. He is in the paths. And this is Eren. Not the teenaged Eren who is determined to rid the world of titans.

Its the Eren who crushed the world. The same Eren who killed their friends. The same Eren who--

Eren hands hold him more firmly, his jade eyes narrow. "Don't even think about it." he threatens.

Armin can't help but wonder. This is different from that Eren. His eyes hold kindness and a certain love that the older Eren never did. Or maybe, Armin was just too tired to see it.

Older Eren pushes a strand of his blond hair behind his ear, a gentle smile on his face. "I will be with you, always." he assures him. "Even when you do exactly what I tell you not to do..."

Eren's eyes soften. "Ymir's will is dangerous..." he murmurs, his thumb travels over his cheek. "Don't provoke her..." he says seriously.

Provoke her?

But Armin hasn't done anything yet.

Eren lifts Armin's body until he can press his lips to Armin's forehead in a gentle kiss. "Why did you make a deal with the devil?" he murmurs.

Armin wants to say something, anything. Maybe demand answers as to who he was. Was he the Eren who killed the world? Or is he the Eren from the future he will create?

Because no! Armin refuses to believe the two timelines will end up the same. He won't let it! Armin sacrificed his life for it!

However, Armin is too exhausted to move.

His eyes see Eren's silhouette fade out of his vision.

Gentle hands put him back to lie on his back.

The last thing he feels is Eren's hand moving right above Armin's heart and his whisper of "I will always be with you."

And then darkness.

"ARMIN!"

The sound is coming from an end of a tunnel, along with an everpresent buzz in his ears.

"Armin, please open your eyes..."

"Is he... Dead?"

"She is, according to what Krista said."

"Shut your mouth, horseface! I can feel his pulse."

He slowly gains enough feeling in his body to move his fingertips. But not enough to open his eyes or talk.

"Dude, you heard Krista and almost broke down crying when she said Armin was shot. This dude doesn't look shot to me."

"Shush! He moved!"

"I don't see any injuries either. Maybe Krista just saw something wrong."

Armin slowly opens his eyes.

It takes a few seconds for his eyes to make something out of black blur and what he sees is Eren's face, who is close to breaking into tears.

"Armin! You're ok!"

Eren pulls his body in a fierce hug. Enough to crush his body in his arms.

"Armin! You're ok!"

Armin looks towards the sound. Marco and the others in his group are running towards him.

Jean reaches him first. He stops a few feet behind. He crosses his hands with a click of his tongue. "Wuah. With the way Krista said it, I thought you're a goner." he says.

A yellow lightening flashes before his eyes.

Right. The paths. It had revived him because he has to stay alive until the third day of fall of 854 until founder Ymir can claim his heart.

Eren lets go of Armin's body. His hands roam around Armin's shoulder and arms, eyes looking for a scar and finding none. His hands wait on the hole in his clothes. "Did you really get shot??" he asks.

Armin clutches the cloths above his chest. He slowly shakes his head. "I lucked out." he lies. "It barely gazed me and I was knocked out from the shock of it."

Eren hugs him again. "Thank goodness, you're ok!"

Armin narrows his eyes.

There isn't much goodness that could be thanked. It's just Ymir and future Eren, who are hellbent on making sure he sees the third day of the fall of 854.

It works out exactly like last time. They call Mikasa and Annie with their flares and they help them capture the bandits and free Krista.

When they're on their way back, Armin's mind is too busy with the picture of future Eren to think about the mission they just walked out of.

slides under a pile of subjects to revise I, a uni student, will now be returning to my natural habitat.

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!!

Because they are afraid

Chapter 5: Because they are afraid

The 104th is back in Trost, a cookoff happens and Armin gets closer to Annie than he expected to, not that he's complaining.

With the battle for Trost fastly approaching, Can Armin convince the warriors or scare them enough to forget about breaking the wall? What will he have to do to reach his goal?

As an apology for going off the grid for two week, I will now be giving a 17k chapter. I got possessed and wrote all this in one day :'D

Also, alot of Aruannie vs Eremin ahead.

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

character death(s). Some blood.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

"Get lost you foul blood!"

The hit against his back is stronger than his body can take and yet Armin holds tightly to the little pill box he's hugging. He keeps his head low and walks down to the internment zone from within the colorful streets of the Marleyan side of Liberio.

No...

This isn't Armin.

Armin takes a deep breath when his senses calm down. The memory doesn't stop. It never does, Armin has learned that he just has to ride this out as if it was his own memory that was traumatizing him. The colossal came with a cost after all.

And the cost surely could be less than having inherited all the memories of being spat on and beaten to death by a man you've never seen because you bought your fathers critical drugs. And that's all you did.

All Berthold did.

Armin's heart squeezes. *This isn't you, this never happened. This isn't you, this never happened. This isn't you, this never happened. This isn't you, this never happened.*

He takes another deep breath and fights off the emotions building behind his eyes and the choking rush of adrenaline in his throat. He holds on to the drugs. He has to, if his father doesn't get his hands on these, he won't survive the night.

The drugstore owner won't let go. He runs after him holding a baseball bat. Berthold starts to run but even a kid bright enough for warrior training is no match for a grown man who never went one day malnourished.

He raises the bat and lands it on his body like he's the one responsible for all that's happened in the old man's life. He curls around and protects the drugs with his body. He shuts his eyes and bites his tongue so as not to cry out.

His father needs this medicine.

He needs to keep it safe.

Safe from the bat hitting his body, safe from the prying eyes of those who refuse to even bat an eye at the abuse.

"hush, it's ok, it's ok."

That sound is new. It was never there before each time Armin went through this memory.

But the sound does nothing to dull down the smack of that bat against his skin, or when he finally cries out when the man raises the bat and brings it down right in his side with all the force he can.

Armin bursts into silent tears because he can't bear it anymore.

But *he* can.

"Shhh, Armin, it's just a nightmare. you can wake up from it?"

This time, the sound is followed by a sense of warm touch.

His body can't move from the cold and dirty ground of Liberio. It spins and the next moment, Armin's face is pressed against an undeniable warmth. Hands play with his hair and smooth sounds travel down his ears.

Right, these memories don't even belong to him.

They are for Berthold. They are for a man who is sleeping right above them in their bunk.

Reality slowly feels solid around him and then-

Only then Armin realizes he's clinging into Eren's chest and crying into his shirt. Armin pushes him back. He pants a little, feeling his heartbeat harshly in his throat. He fists his hands and takes a sharp breath between his teeth.

He sends Eren an angry glare. He grinds his teeth and turns around. "Don't ever do that again."

it's enough pain that I have to share a bunk with you.

Eren blinks in surprise. "But... But why?" he asks. "You looked in pain so I woke you up!"

"I don't need your help with dealing with anything in my life!" Armin snaps angrily, harsher than he intended to.

He remembers the man who Berthold went through so much pain to protect, probably died in the rumbling. What's left of Berthold's memories makes him sad. But not as emotional as it used to make him. It looks... Dulled... Like a friend's father has passed and not his own.

Armin's fingers curl around the sheets until his knuckles are milked from their color.

if memories are a part of what makes us who we are.

a part of you has become berthold.

Armin shuts his eyes. No . That Eren doesn't exist anymore!

Or so he desperately wants to believe. He grabs his head and pushes hard enough that his skull hurts. That Eren doesn't exist. And even then he was lying!!

I have never been affected by Berthold's memories!

Armin pushes harder on his head until Eren grabs his hands and whispers: "Armin! Please stop it, your ears are bleeding!"

My... What?

Armin slowly lets his hands fall, he feels a strange wetness on his left hand and when he brings it up he finds tiny red marks under his

fingernails and a strange throbbing near his earlobes.

Oh .

Armin touches the wounds. His nails have dug hard enough in his delicate skin that it has been torn and bleeding, small nail marks over the skin near his left ear.

Eren gulps. "Clean it. Disinfect it. Bandage it. Check on it. Within one-one week or two." He recites the words his father had told when then they were merely seven. His jade green eyes scan Armin for anything else.

They look... Calmer than Armin expects it too.

Eren leaves and comes back with a first aid kit.

He tends to Armin's wounds silently with far too kind hands.

Armin can't bring himself to stop him.

In their six month mark, the 104th is given their first ever payment.

Armin doesn't think of it as payment and more of an allowance. Many had no idea that they would be given allowances during their cadet days.

Armin wants to roll his eyes because this might be very little for almost everyone here but for him and his grandpa? It might be more than they made back in Shiganshina.

The boys' dorm is drowned under the sound of coins in a small bag. "Ring ring ring" echoes all over the dorms and boys who joke about what they can do with their first paycheck. Others who hoped they paid more money to actual soldiers.

Eren throws himself into their bunk. Armin is already cradling his small blue bag that has a total of five golden coins inside. Armin has

yet to have found the courage in himself to open it.

Eren throws himself inside and plays with his bag. "Do we get an allowance?" Eren murmurs, shocked. He opens the small bag and holds up one of the golden coins in between his fingers. He shakes the bag and lets his ears feast on the sound of jingle-jingle.

Armin looks at his own. He opens it and starts counting it carefully. It's a total of three and a half franks.

It's almost half the average money someone used to make in wall Maria but it's almost the same amount that his grandpa used to make three years ago.

Armin puts the coins back into the bag and puts them carefully in his pocket. Last time, he used that money to get snacks for himself and wasted it by running around different towns with Eren.

Now, he has better things to do with it.

Eren narrows his eyes when Armin tries to tuck himself in for a good night's sleep. He shakes his head and grabs Armin's blanket before he can cover himself with it. "Armin!" he says. "There's a secret party in the girls' dorm. Let's go! I've heard they have sneaked in some beer!" he adds like a whisper.

Armin huffs. He tries to pull his blanket out of Eren's grip but it's pointless. "Eren!-- I don't think--"

"Come on! Even a horseface is going! What's good staying here cooped up all by yourself?" he challenges. "It's as if you're deliberately keeping your distance from everyone!"

Armin makes a face, he crosses his arms over his chest. "I am not keeping myself distant!" he says.

"Then come! I bet it's a good one-- look! Everyone is leaving!"

Eren is right. Armin pokes his head out of their bunk and looks around. The crowd is almost half the amount it usually was this time of the night. Armin narrows his eyes at Eren. "No. I'm just tired, Eren, I don't want to!"

I don't want to get close to people I already know will die.

"What's taking you two so long?"

Both of them look over their shoulder for Mikasa. She slowly steps in their bunk and sits on the bed, crossing her arms over her chest. "You'll be late." she says, looking directly at Eren.

Eren clicks his tongue. "Who the hell opened the door for you??"

"Jean did." Mikasa says, then she clears her throat.

"You're taking too much advantage of that horsefaces naive fascination with you." Eren says, elbowing the other in her side.

Mikasa rubs the place Eren just hit and slowly shakes her head. "Not interested. The only thing I am interested in though, is if you guys are coming to our-- not so secret-- Party."

"I want to!"

"I don't." Armin points out.

"Too bad because you're coming." Eren says, hitting his finger against Armin's chest. He turns his head towards Mikasa with a mischievous grin. "Take his feet, I'll take his hands."

Armin crawls back. "What- No! Don't you dare!"

But Armin is too weak to fight both of them off. He throws his hands and feet and tries to crawl away but Mikasa grabs his feet. "I don't want to party!" he yells but it falls on death ears. Eren grabs Armin's hands and the two of them carry a struggling Armin to the girls room like a sack of potatoes.

Armin gives in favor of his dignity. Mikasa slowly puts his feet back on the ground and opens the door. "See?" he says. "Having some fun is not so bad!"

Armin rolls his eyes at the thought.

Eren's hand snakes into his sides and pushes their bodies closer. "Now stay close, I don't want to lose you."

Armin huffs. "I have a better idea." he says, hitting Eren's hand and breaking his grip on his side. "Stay away from me."

Armin walks into the party. He waits for exactly three seconds before Mina and Thomas show up and drag Eren away. Armin has to take a deep breath. In between the crowd of boys and girls, and the stench of drinks not meant for people their age, Armin finds himself utterly alone.

No matter where he looks, he bumps into someone. Someone who had just feasted upon their hard earned money and bought new clothes, new snacks and new accessories for themselves.

he bumps into someone that will surely die within the next five years.

Armin takes a deep breath.

The air is closing in, Armin clutches his shirt and can feel his sharp heart beat under his fingertips. He tries to control it but soon, his breathing is a fast rhythm that barely gets any air into his lungs. The walls close around his mind.

He can't breathe.

Armin runs. He runs outside and doesn't care how many "watch where you're going!" he hears from random voices. He storms out until he's out of the dormitory and he can feel the cool wind on his skin.

Armin's hands land on his knees and he tries to take his panting breath under control.

It takes a few minutes for him to feel his feet again, to make his lungs expand enough that he can take actual inhales and exhales.

When he can, he just stands up and looks up at the sky.

The moon is full tonight, and the air is clear enough that Armin can see the stars.

Armin wants to be closer to them. His feet take him to the girls dorms again and a ladder. He climbs it up and goes to the roof. He sits on the uneven roof and hugs his knees.

He takes a deep breath.

I'll save them. It doesn't have to come down to that.

Just to keep his hands busy, he takes one of the coins of his allowance and plays with it with his hands.

The silver coin is the biggest amount of money Armin held in his age. Well, he did have access to more money as an adult but as a teenager...

Armin shuts his eyes.

I'll save them.

I'll save them.

I'll save them.

I'll save--

"Hey, this is my lonely spot."

Armin flinches. He turns his head towards the annoyed voice. He sees Annie climbing up to the rood with an angry look in her icy blue eyes. "Why don't you go down and- I don't know- drink with those loud devils?"

Armin swallows hard.

that's our Annie...

"No... I'm not the kind to get drunk. Or party." Armin murmurs, spinning the coin in his finger. "I need to save every penny if I want my grandpa to survive."

"Huh?"

He realizes he has said the last part too quietly. He smiles at Annie instead. "My grandpa. He's in the refugee center. I'll send him a large fraction of my money." he explains.

Annie's eyes widen for a moment before she slowly closes them. "Oh." she murmurs. "Right... You're from Shiganshina."

Armin takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry I invaded your alone place..."

Annie sits down, Armin half expects to be shoved down the roof but Annie doesn't move to hit him or tell him to leave.

In Fact she sits down next to him and pulls her hoodie to cover her face.

(And her blush.)

Armin looks at her.

They stay in relative silence. Neither initiate a conversation and just enjoy the atmosphere away from the party people below.

Armin hoped his mind wouldn't bring it up. But little by little, he starts to think about the future. He starts to think about the last time he saw

Annie. When she was brought out of her crystal just to be killed.

And Armin thinks about Eren's words.

Was Annie's love truly Berthold's influence?

Armin hugs his knees tighter. He turns his head and watches her watch the night sky. She pulls her hoodie closer to cover more of her face. It isn't cold, so she's just trying to hide herself.

was it really Berthold's influence?

Since he turned 16, Armin's greatest moral dilemma has been Annie and Eren. He had been torn between Annie's crystal and the ocean where he met up with Eren. He could let go of neither of them.

And when Eren disappeared, Armin locked Eren away and his only salvation became Annie.

He's thirteen now, but he has those memories. And he has noticed how insufferable Eren is. How he needs to be cared for every step of the way or he'll injure himself with ODM, or get into a fight with Jean, or injure himself in a way that would have killed him if he wasn't a titan shifter, sending a shiver to Armin and Mikasa's heart each time.

Because right now? Armin can stay with Annie forever without batting an eye and...

And...

... With no care in the world.

Armin's eyes widened in disbelief.

Is he so used to Eren's roller coaster of emotions that he can't fathom calmness as a sign of love...

... Or he simply doesn't care enough about Annie to be worried.

Was Eren right about Bertholds influence?

Armin doesn't care.

The atmosphere with Annie looks... Calm.

Armin just wants to enjoy it.

Armin holds a frank and sends the other two in the mail.

His grandpa needs this money more than he does.

Three years pass sooner than a blink of an eye.

Their graduation is in a week.

One week and their last mission as cadets is helping out the garrison in the remaining time as trainees.

"I can't believe we're going to Trost!" Eren says that day, pushing whatever belonging he has gathered in the past three years from their bunk into his bag. His jade green eyes sparkle.

Armin didn't have the same problem. With all the money he spent for his grandfather, he left with little to no belongings, just some spare clothes.

Eren suddenly stops. "Hey... Armin..." he murmurs, he lifts his head to look at others in the dorm, who are packing their own belongings. "Do you think we'll miss this dorm?"

Armin hums. "No, it smells like sweat and germs in here." is all he says, he zips up his bag and throws it over his shoulders.

Eren smiles to himself. "I think I will... I made far too many friends and memories to forget." he says. "Well, you did spend most of your

time by yourself. You didn't talk to anyone other than Annie and Marco unprovoked."

Armin narrows his eyes. "No, I think you made far too many friends!" he snaps. He looks around, invisible hands wrap around his throat. "I don't want to get close to people who'll die in their first mission!" he whispers quietly. Quiet enough that not even Eren could hear him.

Armin finishes packing up and runs out. He can't wait to meet his grandfather again after three long years. They exchanged a few letters but it's not the same as seeing him.

And uh-- the new prosthetic leg he bought.

"Armin, wait for me!" Eren yells but Armin ignores him. His eyes scan for the carriage that is going to take them to Trost.

He sees Jean and Marco chatting near the first carriage. Marco laughs as he boards the wooden carriage. "Marco!" Armin waves, he runs towards the one which Marco boarded, Eren follows him immediately.

He jumps inside and sits next to Marco, the freckled boy gives him one of his signature gentle smiles. "Armin! You're off to Trost too?" he murmurs.

Jean clicks his tongue and leans back. "Is Mikasa coming with you there?" Jean asks, Armin sees the small excited tone in his voice. He nods.

"Oi, horseface. Don't get your hopes up." Eren shouts as he climbs inside the wagon, aiming to sit on the only empty spot next to Armin.

A flash of wind and Annie jumps inside. She falls into the empty spot next to Armin before Eren can sit and kicks Eren down the carriage with a perfectly aimed kick at his stomach.

Eren falls down, he jumps and points a finger at Annie and yells:
"Hey, I wanted to sit here!"

Armin laughs quietly, he covers his lips with his hands and looks away.

Annie lifts her head, she pushes a strand of her hair behind her ears and looks up at Eren with somewhat disgust. "Well I did. You wanna start a childish argument?" Annie snapped back.

"Hey, get up." Eren says, annoyed.

"What's the matter, Yeager? Just board another one." Jean orders with a click of his tongue.

"I don't wan--"

But Eren can't finish it. There is a loud cry from the front that yells at the carriage is about to move. Eren sends an angry look at Annie and then looks at Armin.

Armin shakes his head before he can ask anything.

Eren jumps down but he looks at the carriage without ever taking his eyes off of Armin. It starts moving and getting away from Eren little by little.

Armin holds his eye contact.

His heart suddenly twists in regret.

But he keeps himself steady. If he wants to do anything, he has to stay away from Eren...

"Ah, finally!" Jean snaps and throws his hand over Marco's shoulder. "One good thing about going with the MPs is that I'll never see that suicidal maniacs face ever again!"

Jean smiles and pulls Marco closer. "Just you wait, Marco!" Jean shouts. "The best bars of the interior will be ours in less than two days!"

Marco smiles at Jean's imaginations. Armin can see Marco drowned in that scenario too. His dark eyes sparkle with joy.

"Uh man, I want to take my parents too..." Marco sighs. "So maybe not getting drunk every night, ok?"

Jean gasps loudly. "You're bringing your PARENTS with you to the interior? Wow, nice aren't you?"

Marco arches an eyebrow. "You won't? My parents are important to me, you know." he asks. "Will you visit them when we get to Trost?"

Jean leans back and crosses his arms over his chest. "Duh, of course not."

Armin narrows his eyes.

Pictures of Jean's titan and the last times he saw him cross his eyes. Armin remembers the cold feeling of thinking *what if*.

What if he ran into Jean's parents or Connie's mother as the Yeagerists paraded him through the city as he was taken to his cell.

What if...

Jean should respect the memory of his mother more.

"Come on, Jean." Armin murmurs. "Even I'm visiting my grandpa. Eren and Mikasa are visiting their mom too!"

If everything goes fine, Jean will probably live through all that, but still. Jean should be grateful for his mother a little more.

Armin remembered Mrs Kirstein very vividly. He met her when Jean returned from Marley for the first time. She was middle-aged and

extremely worried, she and her less excited husband searched the entire port until they found Jean in one piece, to their surprise.

They invited the entire squad to their house. Armin has to say it did lift their spirits after Eren disappeared in Marley.

Armin shakes the bitter-sweet memory off with a physical motion of his head. He nodded at Jean with a smile. "Hey, it's our day off. Today! After the maneuver of course." he says. "Eren, Mikasa and I--"

"Uff! I get it. I don't want to-- alright??" Jean snaps.

Marco slowly shakes his head. "Ok then... Suit yourself." he says. "Will you at least come with me to get the horses ready for the manoeuvre?"

Jean puffs his chest out and nods.

Armin's enthusiasm falls right off his face when Jean and Marco's conversation dies down, but the smirks on their faces doesn't. If Marco's death is what it takes for Jean to mature from this...

... It must have been so traumatizing.

"Say Armin..."

Right, Annie.

Annie hoists her backpack higher and hums. "Armin, your squad is the third, right?"

Armin nods quietly. "Yeah, with Eren." Armin raises an eyebrow. "Which one's yours?"

"The 39th." She says, crossing her arms over her chest. "With Marco and those two idiots."

"Reiner and Berthold?"

She hums in approval.

Her stoic eyes shine for a moment before she extinguishes them. Her icy blue eyes meet Armin's for a moment and she wets her lips a little in anxiety. "Armin. Do you have anything to do tomorrow?"

Armin blinks in surprise. "Tomorrow?" he murmurs quietly. "Uhm... No I... I think I have a shift on top of wall rose with canon maintenance and--"

"Cancel it." she says. "I want to check the refugee centers all around Wall Rose in search of my -- Ahem-- father and I... Need your help."

The wagon jumps up and down because the road is old and uneven.

Armin stares at Annie's eyes with surprise.

Why does she...

Then his eyes widened. Because there is no other explanation as to why she wants to keep him away from the walls and in a futile search that Armin *knows* is a barely thought of cover.

Her eyes don't give in. If Armin didn't know her father is on the other side of the world, he might have bought the excuse. But he knows better.

And that means.

They'll kick down the wall tomorrow!

Armin's face doesn't change but he fists his hands until his knuckles have turned white. He knew befriending Annie to this extent was a bad idea. Now he has gotten himself too close to the warriors and--

"I'm sorry Annie... But I don't think they'll give me a day off." he murmurs, his eyebrows knitting together for a second.

"Then skip a day."

"I-I'll see what I can do! But we can find a way to find your father. That's a promise." he assures her. She doesn't know but some of his words really are a promise.

"Ok then." That's all she says and leans back against the carriage, she looks out from the wooden structure and looks at the road.

Armin does the same.

Something about Trost and the interior of wall Rose is beautiful enough to stare at the grass meadows and the faded forest far far away.

Armin is surprised not only by the raw view of nature from Trost, but also by how this is the first time he was paying attention to it.

Nature really is calming.

And every dance of leaves in the forest and every small blue pond with children running around it reminded Armin of how this was Karl Fritz, AKA the first king of the walls, paradise.

Sometimes, he thinks he might have taken the word too literally.

When they get to Trost, Armin hops off the carriage and tells Marco and Annie he's going to the refugee center to pay a visit to his grandfather. Annie immediately narrows her eyes.

She hops down without saying anything and stands on the muddy ground. Armin raises an eyebrow at her. "You're coming too?"

She nods fiercely.

"It has a lot of walking, though." he warns.

She just shrugs.

"Alright! Now I see why this suicidal maniac didn't want Annie around you Armin." Jean chuckles. "Ok, you two can take on a romantic walk. We'll just head over to Trost."

Armin opens his mouth and argues that this is by no means a romantic walk but the carriage starts moving before he can. Jean waves and Marco rolls his eyes.

Annie and Armin are soon left in the dust.

Armin takes a deep breath and forces a smile on his face. "I hope you like the walk."

Annie's eyes don't betray her face, emotionless. "We'll see." She walks past Armin and walks South.

Armin looks at the road ahead. Their way is painted a pale yellow between green herbage on the sides. To the cellar near wall Rose that was transformed into a refugee center.

Wind dances on his face, it pulls some of his hair and makes Armin take a deep relieving breath.

For someone who got off the carriage to come with Armin, Annie sure is determined not to walk next to Armin. Armin runs after her and when he reaches her, Annie looks down.

"So... not that I don't enjoy your presence, but Why are you coming with me?" Armin asks curiously, he looks at her and he can clearly see the reflection of water in her crystal eyes.

They lose their spark for a moment, then Annie closes her eyes. "I have someone to look for..." she says. "I have a father. And I haven't seen him since the day the walls fell."

Armin feels bad for her. She is doing all of this for her father. She has no ambition other than fulfilling the promise she made to her father about returning home.

For a moment, silence settles between them and the only sound is their footsteps as it crushes the leaves underneath their feet.

"Armin..."

"Hm?"

"Would you have killed? If your status in the military and your grandfather's safety depended on that? Would you be the villain of horror stories if it meant keeping your grandfather safe?"

Armin laughs awkwardly. "Where did that come from?"

Annie turns her head towards the pond. Armin can't see the emotions raging in her eyes but he can feel them. "Just answer the question."

Armin takes a deep breath, he glues his eyes to the road ahead and thinks.

Would he?

It's a difficult question because even now, Armin's mind has trouble believing his grandfather is still alive. That he has someone waiting for him. He has someone whose ties won't be severed by mere words.

And he would do anything to protect the old man and return the kindness he raised Armin with.

Although... This won't be the right thing to tell Annie. Somehow, she is relating her story with Armin's and...

"We're all villains in someone's story." Armin says seriously. "A villain or a hero. A good person or a bad person. They are all subjective really. It depends on your point of view."

Armin looks at Annie from the corner of his eyes. "This is a world where not doing something also has its risks and consequences. I

might become a bad guy to my grandfather if I let him suffer."

That makes Annie's eyes widen.

Armin takes a deep breath. "But it's never that simple. There are always variables we can't see. Solutions that we can find if we spend a little more time on it. I guess I'll focus my energy on that instead of *kill kill kill*. "

Armin kicks a nearby pebble and watches it roll along the road.

"And if you had any other choice?"

Armin shuts his eyes. "If only I open my eyes. There is always a choice."

If I can ignore Eren...

And not follow everything he says in the future...

I'll have a clear enough mind not to cause the deaths of thousands.

With every step, they get closer to the refugee center.

And it hits Armin like a tidal wave that maybe... Maybe the answer of keeping away from Eren is standing right next to Armin.

Armin slowly turns his head to look at Annie, smiling unknowingly.

Of course, Annie sees it. She huffs. "What are you staring at?"

"Me? Just thinking..." he sighs. "Ignore it... Hey, Annie?"

"What?"

"I wanna run..." he says, making sure to take some steps faster. "I-I can't wait to see my grandpa!"

"Armin wai--"

But Armin is already running.

He's running, carefreer than he has ever been in his life. The leaves and the stones crush under his feet and he enjoys the dance of wind on his skin.

The refugee center gets closer and closer every second.

Annie runs past him without even trying. Armin is too slow to catch up to her but he doesn't care. She stops a few feet away from the open door of the cellar and waits for him, a barely noticeable smirk on her lips.

"You run too slow."

Armin is panting when he gets to her. "Hey! Im-Im decent." Armin hums. He stares at the cellar and walks inside. He asks around the people if they have seen Oswin Arlert and eventually, a woman points to an old man with a metallic leg that is tucked over his leg. It was after lunch so he was in the line to give away the wooden bowl they ate their stew in.

Oh! So he really did buy a prosthetic!

"Hey Grandpa! Miss me?"

The old man drops the wooden bowl he was holding and faces Armin in slow motion. "Armin... My boy..." he whispers, a smile settles on his face. "... I was hoping the military made you get rid of that haircut."

Armin laughs out loud.

The old man opens his arms and the next moment Armin walks into his embrace. The old man's hands wrap around his shoulders. Armin's brain takes a moment to understand that this is real- his grandfather is alive and well! This isn't that timeline where he had no one to turn to when he felt the weight of the world. He has someone!

Then, Armin notices the height difference.

His grandfather breaks the hug with a smile. "Oh, look. All grown up." he murmurs, now his grandfather has to look up to meet his eyes. "It just feels like yesterday when you left..."

The old man sighs.

Then he arches an eyebrow at something behind Armin. "Where are your manners, Armin?" he says.

"Oh! Sorry. Uhm..." Armin clears his throat. He turns around to smile at Annie, who stays completely stoic. "Eh, Grandpa, she is my classmate Annie. Annie, my grandfather." he introduces them to each other. Armin feels like he's going to regret this but he doesn't pay much mind to his paranoid thoughts.

Annie nods. "Nice to meet you, Mr Arlert." she says.

"Nice to meet you too. It's the first time I'm seeing Armin with friends other than Eren and Mikasa!" the old man says, he holds his hand up so Annie could shake it. Annie does. "Please come with me! You two should be so exhausted."

Armin blinks in surprise. "Grandpa..." he murmurs. "Have you started working again?" he asks, very quietly. Annie looks at him from the corner of her eye, only she can pick the misery in his tone.

The old man sighs but nods. "I'm not useless, Armin."

"I-I never said you were!"

"It's ok to work." he says again, stopping Armin from threading a string of reasons why he should just rest. "Besides. It's just a small job in a bar in Trost."

"A BAR--"

His grandfather narrows his eyes, like a threat. Armin sighs loudly. "Sorry grandpa." he murmurs. "I just want you to be safe. And a place full of drunkards doesn't look like the safest of places."

The old man reaches up to ruffle Armin's hair. "Hey, It'll be alright." he assured him. "Enough of all this! I bet the bar has some tasty food right now. Better than whatever you guys had in the cadet corps. And besides. My shift is almost starting."

His grandfather waves his hand. "Armin, what's with this face?" he says. "You don't need to worry about me. And I can't live off of your soldiers allowance forever. You're a young man, Armin, you'll need your money."

Armin mumbles meaningless words under his breath. He wants to say that he can. He can support his grandfather and the old man will never be a burden as long as he's alive but...

His grandpa pats his shoulder. "Now, let's get going. We shouldn't keep your friend standing." His grandfather points out.

Armin doesn't argue with that.

They follow the old man into Trost and into the middle of the city. Annie never says a word until they reach the bar and she says:"this place is falling down."

Armin agrees with her. The structure is old and it takes all his self control not to take his grandfather's hand and carry him back to the refugee center. Because this building is a wind away from crumbling to dust.

But Armin knows how hard it must have been for his grandpa to find a job so he doesn't say it.

"Yes," His grandpa says with a sigh. "The owner did promise a reconstruction but... I know he's a little low on money."

He opens the door for them with a smile. "Come on in! I bet Eren and Mikasa are already inside." He says.

Annie and Armin walk in. Armin grips his backpack a little tighter as he asks: "Eren and Mikasa...?"

"Well, if you guys are here that means those two have headed straight for their mother... And she's here so--"

"Armin!" Eren almost screams.

Armin doesn't have the chance to react when Eren tackles him and hugs him from behind. His eyes lock with Annie and all the enthusiasm falls from them. Eren rests his chin on Armin's shoulders and glares daggers at Annie. "What is she doing here!?! Oh-- Hi Mr Arlert."

His grandpa gives him a polite smile. "As energetic as ever I see," he laughs. "I invited her to have lunch here. I know your mother has already made some for you three."

"Eren, come help Mikasa! Don't bother Mr Arlert!"

"Coming mom!" Eren yells back.

The old man pats Armin's back. "You go ahead," he says. "I have something to check in storage and I'll be right back."

Armin nods and goes with Eren to the kitchen. Annie follows him closely. The kitchen is clean and in an infinitely better condition than the outside. Carla is cleaning the dishes and making the bar ready for the busy night ahead. Armin blinks a few times to make sure this is actually Carla Yeager. Eren's mother, whom he saved from death.

He smiles awkwardly and waves his hand at Carla's direction. "Hello, Miss Carla!" he says. "Long time no see."

That makes sense. If Eren's mother works here, she was the one who probably asked the owner to employ his grandfather. To his

surprise... Carla no longer looks youthful and energetic as she used to. There are bags under her eyes and some gray hair on her scalp. It's normal, Stress does that to people. However, her hair style is the same. Chocolate brown hair, that Eren has inherited from her, draped at her left shoulder.

She smiles, "oh, Armin... You have all grown so much and uhm..."

Armin steps and stands next to Annie. "Miss Carla, she is my friend Annie. Annie, Eren and Mikasa's mother, Carla."

"Nice to meet you." Carla says while drying her hands with a towel.

Annie nods her head a little too low. Her voice is almost too shy when she says: "thank you for having me."

It's... Almost uncharacteristic to see Annie so shy. But then again, he never saw her within the atmospheres of a somewhat family.

Carla went towards the stove and started pouring the stew into a big bowl. "Armin, Annie. Can one of you take this to the table? Mikasa is currently cleaning it."

Annie steps in. Without one word, she takes the steaming hot stew and takes it out of the kitchen.

Armin stands there for a few seconds until Eren comes in with two full bags of vegetables. "There mom-" he says. "Uhm... Anything else you need?"

Carla narrows her eyes. "I need you to quit the military." she says simply.

Eren sighs. "Mom, please, not this again-"

Carla holds up a hand. "I never have and I never will approve of your choice. And I'll bring it up every chance." she says as a matter of fact. "Now please bring the rice. And let us eat the meal that might be the last meal we eat together."

"Mom please..."

Carla walks out of the kitchen without saying anything else. Eren sighs loudly and he picks up the big rice plate next to the stove.

Armin's eyes soften. "She... I thought you'd convinced her..."

Eren shakes his head, there is a certain sadness in his eyes that makes Armin's stone heart melt for it. "There is no convincing her Armin... She's still so bitter about it... I guess I get my stubbornness from her." he mumbles.

Armin's hands hesitates. He tries to put a comforting hand on Eren's shoulders but it shakes all the way until it's on the shoulder pad of Eren's jacket. "It... It'll be fine, " he says.

He's not planning on letting Eren die anytime soon.

Eren has a titan, he'll be fine.

For now, at least.

Eren shakes it off. "Forget about it. It's fine... Though I have to ask you something, Armin.." he says.

"What is it?"

"Why did you bring Annie along?" Eren frowns and crosses his arms across his chest. "I like Annie, I do! But not enough to share you with her!" he says. "Please don't get close to her, Armin!"

The words suddenly turn the soft atmosphere very bitter.

Eren's words are familiar, Spoken in different concepts but still familiar.

Armin, were you talking to Annie's crystal again?

you know she can never talk to you.

She's an enemy.

Stop talking to her!

Berthold has taken over your mind.

A ball of anger rises to his throat and Armin swallows it down. "You're not the boss of me, Eren! I choose who to hang out with and who not to. And you're getting dangerously close to the group of people I never want to see again!"

Eren gasps. "No! Sorry, I didn't do anything."

He slowly lifts his gaze from the ground to glare at Eren. "Don't be so childish again." he warns. "Jealousy doesn't suit you."

He goes out and leaves Eren stunned.

Annie doesn't speak one word during lunch. But her eyes sparkle when Carla comes with donuts as desserts. She almost bows to her in gratitude for the donut.

During lunch, Eren talks all about the adventures they had that were too long to be put on their papers. Carla grew paler paler by every word and Armin saw his grandfather rolling his eyes more than a couple of times.

But the stew is warm and the donut is sweet. He doesn't have anything to complain about with a full belly, sweetened tooth and his grandfather's presence.

If anything, this deal with Ymir was worth it because of this one little sequence.

Time comes that they have to leave. Armin, Eren, Mikasa and Annie wave goodbye to Carla and Oswin as they leave for the garrison

station of Trost. Where a manoeuvre is going to be held to prepare everyone for a titan attack.

Typically, Eren and Armin are in the same team while Mikasa is given her own squad. She's the top one after all, there is no doubt about that.

Armin is grouped up with Mina and Thomas. He still has no idea how he must feel. His heart aches but otherwise--

They are given the job of protecting the third line of defense as the residents of Trost slowly evacuate. Dummy titans are posted all across town and cadets fly around slicing their napes.

Everyone has their eyes on dummy titans.

All except one Eren Yeager who looks at Armin after each time he kills a statue titan.

... And Armin doesn't react.

"Why aren't you talking to me!" Eren begs. Armin concentrates on the next titan dummy but Thomas beats him to it. He swings and cuts his nape loudly. "Woho!"

"Careful, Eren!" Mina says playfully. "Thomas might just beat your record while you're begging your boyfriend's forgiveness."

Armin tries to look at Mina from the mess of his blonde hair while moving in their air with their ODM. "For your information, I'm not his boyfriend!"

Mina smiles. "Doesn't matter!" she says. She speeds past Armin and throws herself at a titan dummy and slashes his nape.

Armin flinches at the sound.

If only killing a titan was that easy.

If only Armin didn't have to witness their deaths one by--

"Well, our jobs are done for now." Eren says and lands on the nearest roof. Armin lands on his knees right next to him. "THOMAS! Mina!" he yells. "I still have a higher count from both of you combined!"

Armin flinches at that.

He has to find a way to make sure Thomas and Mina survive the next day or else he might never get rid of that weight on his conscience.

He grinds his teeth and stands up. Armin looks down at the titan dummies. His mind provides him with strange pictures of the past life. The one he was too paralysed to do anything but watch as his comrades got eaten one by one.

Armin swallows the lump in his throat. Being sorry for himself won't do anything good.

"Well, this maneuver training is more or less over." Armin puts the blades back in his ODM. It makes a loud sound of metal against metal as it slides inside. "And it's pathetic."

Eren stands up. He's hopeful. His jade eyes shine with a burning hope for the future that Armin fails to see. He looks into the horizon. "I'll have faith... Armin... We're slowly standing up again..."

He fists his hands on his sides. "We won't be caught off guard again... Humanity can strike back sooner or later! Believe it!" he says, hitting his fist against his heart playfully.

Armin looks back at the crowd under them. He runs his hand through his long hair and pulls it back, almost painfully, until it feels like it's being yanked out of his scalp. "It's not enough..." he says. "If the colossal returns... We're not equipped enough to fight these many

titans. And besides, what hope do we have other than sacrificing hundreds to get that hole cieled again--"

Armin shuts his eyes when he notices what he's spoiling. He bits his tongue and lets go of his hair, the honeylocks falling down his face. "Doesn't matter... We'll..."

When he turns around, he catches Eren staring almost dumbly.

Eren slowly rubs the back of his neck when Armin clicks his tongue angrily at him. "What are you staring at?"

"I... I don't like this Armin..." Eren whispers. "Too sad and too pessimistic... What happened? Is it something I can help?"

Armin grinds his teeth. "Nothing you can help with..." he shuts his eyes. "It's just

There is something in my mind that I can't... Can't postpone anymore."

"Like what?"

Armin takes a deep breath. "Like telling you to stop jumping into danger!" Armin yells. "Do you have any idea how many times you jumped into battle! If their titans were real they would have made you their meal in the first thirty seconds."

"Come on, Armin--"

"No, I won't. Because this hotheadedness of yours will get someone killed sooner or later."

Eren slowly raises his hands. "Ok, ok. I'll try better next time."

"Good. Now hang on to that promise until--"

Dang Dang.

Armin lets out the breath he didn't know he was holding. He looks down at the empty streets of Trost one last time.

Dang Dang.

That is the withdrawal signal.

Which meant the maneuver was now over.

Thomas and Mina land near them, a smile on both of their faces. "Oh man! Guess who couldn't kill a dummy."

Eren arches an eyebrow. "I killed more than twice that you did, Mina."

Mina shakes her head. "Ah, no no. I meant someone else. I just heard his loud shout and the argument he was having with Sasha over that."

Eren's eyes sparkle with mischief. "Please tell me it was horseface!"

Thomas laughs. "It was horseface."

Eren and Thomas high five and both scream after bursting into laughter.

"I wanna see it." Eren says loudly and jumps down the roof. Mina and Thomas go after him. Armin follows them with an Eyeroll.

They fly through the city until they get close to the sound of argument. People have gathered around Sasha, Connie and Jean. The moment Armin sees Annie standing next to a wall, he runs to her. "What's happened?" he asks.

Annie clicks his tongue. "What else did you expect from a bunch of kids?" she says. "Arguing over something simple again."

"Like what?"

"Sasha slices the dummy that Jean was aiming for." Annie says, rolling her eyes.

Armin opens his mouth to say something but he's interrupted by the shift of atmospheres and people saluting one by one as Commander Pixys comes in.

Jean and Sasha jump, hitting their fists against their chest, the argument completely forgotten.

Pyxis hums thoughtfully. "I have heard there is an argument here..." he says, rubbing his chin. "An argument about who should have won?"

Armin can see the effect of alcohol on the commander's eyes, and in the uncertain way he walks.

Apparently so does Eren because he slips near Armin and whispers: "is the commander Drunk?"

Armin shrugs.

"I have just the way to break the tie." the commander says, holding his hand up.

"What??" Sasha and Jean speak at the same time.

Pixys lowers his hand and smiles widely, his grin reaches his ears. "A cooking match!"

Complete silence falls in the crowd.

Jean's face twists into a frown and Sasha's eyes widen.

Eren elbows Armin with a covered laugh. "Oh, he definitely is drunk." he mumbles.

Pyxis steps forward. "Yes! A cooking match. Tonight, you shall give a dish and I shall judge who is more worthy!"

"But commander--" Jean tries to argue.

"All done!" Pyxis says and turns around. People salute as he walks away. Jean stays frozen, beyond shocked.

The crowd has moved away by the time Jean is ready to move. He takes a deep breath and turns around. He almost bumps into Armin if he hadn't stepped aside.

Armin smiles at him. "We can help if you want," he offers. Eren's jaw falls to the floor. Before he can say anything, Jean responds.

"Really? Oh well I do need some help." he says, his hazel eyes looking at Armin and then at Annie. Annie shrugs but doesn't outright refuse it.

Eren clicks his tongue. "I wanna help." Eren narrows his eyes. "If Armin's in then so am I--"

"YEAGER!"

The commanding sound came from behind them. "You're needed in the gas maintaining storage."

"Ah thank the walls!" Jean sighs loudly. "Now shoo. Eren. The three of us need to catch a boar."

Eren grinds his teeth and stomps his feet as he walks away.

The boar hunt is a disaster.

Armin can never fathom Sasha's endless love for food and her ambition to get it

(Back then, her last words were "meat" after all.)

In the end, it was her who brought a boar into town with exposable meat to give away. It is her whom people cheer for.

And it's Armin and Annie left with a very angry Jean.

His solution to this problem is just like it was last time. He sneaks both of them inside the garrison's headquarters and when they are alone in an empty damp storage room with only a small light, he holds up the key he has stolen.

Jean's face is troubled, frowned and angry as he speaks. "We can enter the commandant's office and steal some meat for tonight's cook off."

Armin chuckles. "Sure, we'll get some meat and--"

Then, Armin remembers what was supposed to happen here. His younger self had been so naive back in the day. Armin doesn't care about that, however, when he sees the look of desperation on Jean's eyes, he realizes there is a lot he has to come to terms with and his relationship with his parents is one of them.

So Armin calls forth his acting skills.

"The-the commandant's office!" he stutters. "But... But that's stealing."

"Yeah, that's the whole point. I'll distract him and you--"

"We would be stealing and if we get caught--" Armin grabs the sides of his face with a loud gasp. "Oh dear! If we get caught we can never erase this shame."

"Armin--"

"Theft is something I'll screw up while doing!" Armin laughs maniacally. He runs to the stairs. "Sorry, Jean, I gotta--"

"Armin, look out!"

Armin skips a stair and falls on his ankles. When he grabs his foot and screams, he is no longer acting.

Annie immediately picks him up by his shoulders, she mumbles incoherently under her breath as she tries to carry Armin up and into the infirmary. Jean rushes to help once his shock is over.

After being checked, Armin is left in a room and told his injury was nothing serious. He just needs some ice and he'll be as good as new.

When Jean offers the same to Annie. Her reaction is just as he expects it to be. She crosses her arms over her chest and huffs angrily. "Na-Ah. I'm out." she says simply.

Jean takes a deep breath and says, very loudly and clearly, that he has no option than to do it himself. Armin watches him leave the room and close the door with a loud bang.

Annie doesn't seem to care about that, however.

She sits down on Armin's bed and glares daggers at his way. She hums while shaking her head. "Are you really that clumsy that you can't even steal something?" Annie asks, an eyebrow raised.

Armin shrugs. Something in his guts really wants to tell her the truth and spill out secrets like he did when she was in her crystal.

But this time, the voice of logic in his brain was surprisingly stronger. That logic calls him irresponsible for even considering it. For *doing it* all those years.

But now, when he looks at Annie and sees her healthy and sound, he understands maybe Eren was right about a thing or two when he said he was being controlled by Bertholds memories.

Stop! He was lying!

Don't go down this thought process!

"Did you break your jaw too, somehow?"

Her question takes him by surprise. "Sorry, I dozed off. Must be the painkillers." he murmurs. The right side of his head is throbbing and his hand feels numb to touch the surface of the bed or his own body. Maybe that wasn't a lie after all.

(It's just a little bruise. A painful one but one that will fade even before the night hits.)

Armin shakes his head. "Well... About your question. I'm not exactly a skilled thief."

Annie raises an eyebrow. "Then how did you survive the refugee camps?"

That... Is a very good question.

Armin remembers how bony and weak he was when he signed up for the cadet corps this time. His mind was so overrun by the fact that he had to protect his grandfather, or pretending to be ok when Eren and Mikasa asked how he was. Carla worked too hard to soothe the worries for her children all while Armin had to worry for himself.

Armin smiles bitterly. "Pure luck..." he answers. "Sometimes I think this famine was one of the worst things people of Wall Maria experienced."

Annie presses her mouth to a thin line.

"You should learn to make your hands dirty before it gets too late." Annie narrows her eyes. "What good is your pride when you're starving?"

Armin shrugs. "It's not like I was starving!" he laughs awkwardly. "... It's just I never really thought about it. What about you? Why didn't you help Jean?"

She crosses her arms over her chest. "This was idiotic from the start." she says. "Who cares about a cooking competition?"

"Jean does." Armin laughs. "I wonder what he's up to, now..."

As if the world was waiting for him to say it, Jean bursts through the door, a small smile on his lips. He slowly closes the door and steps closer to the bed. "Are you feeling better?"

Armin nods. He slowly sits up and arches an eyebrow at Jean.

"You look..." Annie trails off, unsure of what to say.

Jean puts his hands on his hips. "Annie! Please write this down, I have a shopping list you and Armin need to take care of!"

Annie hums, "what's with the motivation all of a sudden?"

Jean smiles triumphantly. "I have an idea-- I'll make some homemade omelet!"

Annie crosses her arms over her chest. "Do you seriously expect an omelet to win against a boar meat?"

Jean's smirk stays in place. "It's not just any omelet." he looks at Armin. "You good or you wanna rest?"

Armin pushes himself up to his elbows. "There is no way I'm missing this!" he says with a smile.

Turns out, Jean doesn't need help with cooking.

After Annie brings in the ingredients. Jean starts and Armin and Annie can just stay back and watch with awe. Jean sticks out his tongue as he carefully measures the ingredients and makes sure the eggs and potato cook just perfectly.

He asks for no help.

(Armin takes the shopping list Annie had written and shoves it into his pocket.)

(He's going to need a sample of her handwriting.)

Armin and Annie stay behind Jean.

Sasha just gave his boar steak in front of Pixys and the old man took a bite.

Commander Pixys, one of the most influential people of the nation, is speechless. He stares forward with his usually drunk eyes wide and surprised. His hands have frozen above the steaming boar meat.

Jean's face is neutral, his breathing is even and Armin detects no signs of stress from his old and new friend. Armin leans forward to take a good look at Jean's face. "Why do you think the commander just... Just froze?"

The right half of Jean's lips pull into a smirk. His eyes don't move from the scene in front of him. "The boar must be delicious." he says, confidently.

Before Armin can point out that this isn't good news. Pixys suddenly stands up and roars loudly. It echoes all around them and shakes every soldier to their core. "THIS BOAR HAS GIVEN ME INCREDIBLE STRENGTH!" he raises his fists and aims for the skies. "I CAN DEFEAT EVERY TITAN THAT COMES IN MY WAY-- AUGH"

The man makes a huge sound like a beast and sits down again.

Soldiers immediately start to hum and murmur among themselves. Pixys looks at Sasha with a wide grin. "You, soldier, have made this a fantastic evening indeed!"

Sasha smiles and takes the rest of the steak with her. She sends Jean and his group a triumphant smirk as if saying: "bring it on!"

She steps back and stands next to Reiner and Connie, she puts her hands on her hips and holds her chin high. Although Armin can see the noticeable tremor of her hand that she stopped.

Jean steps forward. He puts the tray in front of Pixys and steps back. "Bon appetit."

Pyxis looks at the omelet for a few seconds. He looks reluctant to taste it but Jean doesn't look affected by it. Pyxis takes a piece and puts it into his mouth.

"Mmf. This is the best omelet I've ever tasted!" pyxis declares loudly. "It smells and tastes... It smells and tastes... Dangerously like home."

Pixys stops himself from being overly emotional over it. He takes another bite and swallows hard. "Thank you, soldier. This is a really memorable dish."

Jean nods and takes the dish away.

"Now... The winner." Pixys says loudly and stands up. He looks at the audience and then at Sasha and Jean. "This has been a memorable night. Packed with delicious food. Tonight, I will never forget. But well, both dishes were delicious and we had a change of procedure."

"So who is the winner!?" someone shouts from the crowd.

Pixys clears his throat. "Although the meat was packed with protein and a taste I don't usually get to see. Nothing beats the taste of homemade food." he declares. "And you have your winner."

The crowd is shocked into silence.

And then they cheer. Jean's face pulls a small smile, genuine and happy. He turns to the two of them and thanks them with a small "thank you" before he goes to Sasha.

Even Annie is surprised at the reaction. Her eyes are slightly wider than her normal self and she's putting her hands on her hips. "Wow, who could have guessed?" Annie whispers.

Armin slowly shakes his head left to right. He's just glad he spent some time goofing around with his friends. "Certainly not me."

Sasha has fallen to the ground and thinking about every choice she has ever made that has made her fail like this. Jean offers her a hand and makes her stand up to her feet.

Armin smiles at the scenery.

Jean...

Sasha...

Armin's body freezes. His breath catches in his throat and his eyes widen almost painfully.

the girl rolls inside the airship. She has her gun ready and she aims at the first one she sees. Sasha is hit in her stomach, a vital wound that doesn't let her last until they get to help. Armin later learns the girl was named Gabi.

Jean's titan looks nothing like him. When he attacks, he attacks with full force. He doesn't look calm and doesn't act calm but mindless like every other pure titan. He gets crushed like every other flesh and bone that Eren crushed under his colossal feet. Armin can not see his titan anymore.

Armin turns around and runs away.

"Armin?"

He ignores Annie's call and runs back into the kitchen. He puts his hand on the counter and leans on it. His exhales come out in short gasps and endless pantings. Armin shakes a sharp breath through his teeth and tries to calm down.

Inhale....

Hold it for one... Two... Three....

Exhale....

Inhale....

Hold it for one... Two... Three....

Exhale....

After a few minutes, his breathing is normal again and he straightens his back just in time to hear someone walk into the kitchen. "What's with the sudden run?" she asks.

Armin gives her a tired smile. "I just needed something. Jean made some extra omelets for us...." he murmurs. He finds the lunch box lying on the counter and picks it up.

"Do you need help?" Annie asks, pointing at his leg.

Armin stands a little straighter, the pain in his knees is more or less gone completely. "Yeah, I'm ok." he says, holding the food boxes with care. "I should get going... We must be back on duty tomorrow and I want to give some of Jean's omelet to my grandpa..."

Armin shrugs.

Then he wets his lips and tries to keep his eye contact with Annie.
"Do you... Want to come with me?" Armin asks out of manners.

Annie presses her mouth to a thin line. "No..." she says.

She turns around to leave but Armin's next words make her stop.

"I really had fun with you today, Annie..."

She stops. Her eyes widen and she looks at him from the corner of her eyes.

Armin doesn't know where the words are coming from but he needs to get them off his chest before doing what he is up to. Because he might never have the chance again. He didn't in the other world, here might be no different.

Besides... With the plan he has in mind...

Armin licks his lips nervously. "I was hoping we could do that again sometime," he murmurs. He fails to summon the courage to look in her icy blue eyes and say it. So he misses her blush.

"Are you asking me out, Arlert?"

The question hangs in the air for a minute before Armin's inner battle calms down.

"I am..."

"You shouldn't. I'm sorry." Annie says seriously. She looks back and fists her hands on her sides. "Your grandpa is too kind. You shouldn't worry him this much. You're lucky to have a father figure like him."

Armin raises an eyebrow. "I uhm... I think all father figures hold some love and respect."

"Mine doesn't." is all she says before she walks away, not looking back once.

It was a nice lie to tell Annie, but Armin wasn't going to visit his grandpa.

The news of the cooking match echoed all over the 104th.

And a certain brunet named Berthold Hoover has definitely heard it. If not from others, definitely from Reiner.

Annie should still be in the dining hall, and Reiner will spend the entire night helping Sasha and Connie cook the rest of the boar they caught.

Armin bites his lip.

He has been waiting for an opportunity like this for three years. He can't let it go to waste. Armin leans against the wall of the boys dorm. His hands shake as he writes a note over the food box with the best imitation of Annie's handwriting he can.

(He stole a sample of her handwriting from the shopping list she wrote for Jean.)

"Omelet. Eat. Meet us in the forest for revision."

Armin puts the note over the food box and sneaks inside the dorm room. His hands are wet with nervous sweat but he keeps his face neutral.

He hides the foodbox under Bertholds pillow and walks out of the dorm, trying not to make the two others in the room suspect him.

Armin goes to the storage room and takes out his ODM. He lets his hand run over the smooth metal and he checks every single anchor, blade and gear to make sure it won't fail him.

Although it's painfully clear he won't die until the third day of fall of the year 854, it still takes time for him to be revived. Based on last

time, about an hour or so before he wakes up again from the realm of the dead.

Time is crucial, he can't lose it.

Armin puts his ODM in tact and avoids the mirrors on his way out. He clings to his ODM harness and swallows hard.

He has to wait and catch his nervous breath before he steps into the forest. He stares at the long, large trees surrounding the forest for just a moment, sweat falls down his temples.

Is this even going to work?

you can just go back! It's not too late- -

Armin narrows his eyes.

This is... This is the only chance he has.

Armin runs into the forest and waits for Berthold to take the bait.

Armin sits, cross legged and fidgeting with the grass under his feet. He yanks some from the ground and lets it fall to the ground. He's sitting in the middle of a huge empty space in the forest near training camp. It's desolate enough that they won't be caught. It's summer so the weather is warmer and Armin doesn't need a coat, his cadet ODM and uniform will keep him warm enough.

It's been an hour, and each second passes slower than the last. Armin waits for Berthold to walk right into his trap while Annie and Reiner are too preoccupied with the omelet and boars tonight.

Armin rests his head in his hands and takes a shaky breath through his teeth.

Mina...

Thomas...

countless others...

Marco...

Armin swallows hard.

All our sanity...

Eren and Mikasa's hopes...

Armin looks up at the nail of the moon above the sky. Something about it is calming his raging heart. Armin taps his pocket and sees the syringe is in its place. If Berthold refuses his proposal, he'll have to...

He'll have to...

Armin doesn't like to think about it.

And he doesn't get the time because the next second, he hears footsteps crushing the grass under his feet. Armin jumps to his feet, it takes all his self discipline not to run away and stay exactly where he was supposed to be.

Soon, someone steps into the light with a confused expression on their face. It takes a few minutes for Armin to recognise Berthold from his height and mop of dark hair.

"Armin! What are you doing here!?" he asks. "It's late! You should be going back to the dorms..."

Armin opens his mouth to say something but no words leave his tongue. His skin starts to sweat, his heart beats maddeningly in his chest even when he can keep his face from breaking down.

Berthold narrows his eyes. "Armin... Are you ok?" he tries to take one step towards Armin but Armin shouts: "NO STOP! STAY BACK!"

Berthold freezes.

He blinks in surprise. "Armin, are you ok?" he asks again. "You look tired. I bet that cooking match with Jean was trying. Why don't you go back to the dorm to rest?"

Armin shuts his eyes.

"I can't move."

"Why?"

Do it you coward!

Armin fists his hand tightly enough that his nails dig into his palm. "Berthold." Armin says, his tone suddenly turned serious. His blue eyes stare at Berthold devoid of any emotion. "I know you're the colossal titan."

Berthold blinks.

then he bursts into an awkward laughter. He turned around and waved dismissively, but Armin didn't miss the nervous sweat that formed on his forehead. "Ah, Armin, you're exhausted. Let's get back to camp and--"

"I know about Marley."

It physically pains Armin to say the country's name out loud. Somewhere where people don't even know it exists. But the name is enough to break through the Berthold facade.

His eyes widen then the cold face of the warrior that is trained into his bones settle.

"You can't fake that..." Berthold says finally. "... You really are smart, Armin."

Armin swallows hard.

Berthold takes a step forward.

"NO STAY BACK-" Armin yells and Berthold stops. "I-I overheard you and Reiner talking the other day." he lies, looking directly at Bertholds eyes as he did so. "You really are the colossal titan and you want to kick down wall Rose tomorrow, don't you?"

Bertholds face morphs into disgust.

He grunts angrily and looks away. "Smart bastard." he snaps.

Armin's eyes widened. "Why would you do that?" he asks, it takes all his mind to keep his emotions from slipping into his tone. "Why would you kill so many people, again! Why would you kill so many people!!"

"Because I need the founder to get back home!" Berthold yells. The sound of metal against metal echoes in the area. Berthold narrows his eyes and blinks his eyes, trying to get rid of the emotions bubbling behind his eyes. "You think I want to kill them? Who in their right mind would want that--"

Berthold stops and takes a sharp breath. His hands are shaking. "No one will find us. No one will save us." he murmurs. "I can just fulfill my duty so I can go back home."

"You can't find the founder this way!" Armin says, calmer than Berthold. "And Marley certainly won't let you off the hook this easily!"

Berthold narrows his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Berthold, but this mission of yours will cost so many lives!" Armin yells. "There are easier ways to put this aside with Marley!"

Berthold takes a shaky breath. "Huh? Like what?"

"Let's just talk it over!"

"Talk it over?" Berthold repeats. He tastes the words before he points his blades at Armin and swallows hard.

Something happens behind Berthold's mind that Armin can't read.

But when his hands close around the blade and the shaking of his hands stop, Armin realizes he has made a choice. A choice Armin wasn't hoping for.

"I'm sorry Armin, but this mission's value is above all." Berthold says, his eyes narrow. "I really wish I didn't have to do this."

His blade reflects in the moonlight.

please don't. Give this chance to us. Armin pleads silently. He stares at Berthold's eyes and waits for one moment of hesitancy. He sees none.

Berthold takes another step forward, Armin stays still even though all his instincts told him to run.

"Why can't we talk this over with Marley? Why must we all die?" Armin asks again. "Give me a good reason, Berthold!"

Berthold stops.

He moves his blade in the air, his eyes don't meet Armin's. Maybe he was ashamed. Maybe he was thinking. Armin doesn't know.

"Because Marley has my family. Because I need to do it for my father and I to survive." Berthold whispers, his voice breaking. "I don't want to do this..."

Armin tilts his head, smiling gently. "You don't have to." he assures him. "If you warriors talk to Marley, maybe we can make something out of this!"

Berthold looks down. "Marley is more likely to listen to their stray dogs than to us." he sighs. He raises his blade again and walks to

Armin, this time with sure steps. "I'm sorry Armin. But I have to do this. You are my trusted comrade. I care for you, but you have died now that you know our secret."

"If we just talk--"

"If I talk, will you all agree to die? Every single soul in Paradise?" Berthold asks, his face suddenly drowns in a numb coldness. "Because that's what Marley wants."

Armin's eyebrows arch.

He has... He has heard those words before.

"It's not your fault." Berthold says when he sees the hurt in Armin's eyes. "It's just... You'll have to die before our secret gets out."

Armin takes a deep breath. "So you refuse to talk about this?"

"I'm sorry... There is simply nothing to be done about it..." Berthold sighs.

Berthold takes out his dual blades from his ODM gear.

Armin's heart skips a beat.

Berthold is far stronger than him, if he really wishes to, he can slice him before Armin can move a finger.

"You said killing us is what Marley wants... Tell me, what do you want, Berthold?" he asks.

Berthold closes his eyes, he thinks for a small moment before his eyes turn sharp and focused. "To save my family and motherland, Marley."

It feels like Armin was stabbed through the heart before Berthold even got close. Armin slowly shakes his head. "Then I'm sorry too. You left me no choice." Armin mumbles.

Ignoring Armin's words is Berthold's worst mistake.

He runs and raises his blades, aiming to kill Armin on sight.

Little does he know Armin is standing in a trap.

Berthold runs towards him.

The ground makes a loud noise and breaks in half.

Before Berthold's blade can reach Armin's face, the ground empties from under his feet and he falls. Falls. falls. Armin falls too, but his ready ODM gear catches him before he falls halfway into the hole in the ground. Berthold falls right into the blades facing upwards. Three blades pierced Berthold's chest, neck and abdomen.

Armin slowly lands using his ODM gear.

The zipping sound of ODM fills with Berthold's wet gasp.

Armin's eyes stare dumbly at Berthold's body as it quickly loses its precious blood. His blue eyes focus on the blade that has stabbed his back and is standing up from his throat.

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line.

The wooden plate Armin was standing on, could only hold on to his weight. If Berthold stepped on it, it would snap.

And he did.

And he fell into the trap.

Armin slowly lowers himself safely to the ground.

He disconnects the ODM and walks towards Berthold. His blue eyes stare at his dark ones. His hands don't shake as he reaches for Berthold's body. The first thing he checks is Berthold's pulse. To his surprise and relief, the other boy is dying. The pulse under his hands

is weak, barely there. If Armin doesn't do something about it, Berthold will die within seconds.

Unfortunately for him, Armin isn't planning to.

Armin kneels down and hits his fist against his chest. Berthold was really unlucky. A blade pierced his neck before he had the chance to do anything about it.

"I will do everything in my power to make sure children in Marley won't feel pressured like you, Berthold." he promised the other, whom he once upon a time had his memories.

Berthold fights to stay alive. His hands flinch and his dark eyes are bloodshot. His chest rises and falls with all its might. But it's all a fruitless battle, his nape is damaged. He is as good as dead now.

Armin reaches for the syringe in his back pocket. He takes the metal box and opens it. He rolls the syringe and container in place and stands above Berthold.

Armin wets his lips as he kneels down and carefully injects the serum into Berthold's back. He sighs in relief when he extracts the familiar yellow liquid of a titan's spinal fluid.

"I already have blood on my hands." Armin says to himself, as he watches the syringe fill to the brim. Berthold's spinal fluid should be enough on its own to trigger Armin's transformation.

He is going to do it.

He'll make sure the power of the colossal won't be used against them again.

Armin swallows hard as he takes out the syringe from Berthold's back.

Armin stands up and rests the needle against his own forearm. His hands shake with hesitation. He narrows his eyes with a deep

breath.

This is risky.

No, this is stupid--

Armin holds the syringe tightly, the glass digs into his hands and he can't bring himself to push the needle into his hands.

Do it.

Do it, you coward.

For Marco! For Mina! For your grandpa !

Armin shuts his eyes and pushes the syringe into his hand. It goes deep, almost hits his bone, too deep.

It burns, the syringe burns and Armin hisses in pain. Now he has to push the liquid into his arms and he won't even remember eating Berthold.

Just like last time.

"Pa... Pa..."

Armin's brain suddenly clears. His eyes snap towards Berthold. His eyes see nothing, they just stare at the moon, his lips quiver with barely spoken words.

"Pa... Pa... Is he..." he gasps, his body is losing blood and it's happening quicker than Armin can stop even if he wanted to.

Armin's heart clenches, his breath stops in his throat, his thumb is frozen over the syringe, reluctant to push the titan serum inside and make himself inherit the colossal.

"Is he... Going to... Live...?"

Grandpa... Are you going to live?

Armin yanks the syringe out of his body and throws it away into the dirt. He doesn't wait a few seconds to make sure whether the titan serum was injected or not, he falls to his knees near Berthold and holds his hand with both of his own.

"Your father will be ok." Armin promises him, with the most reassuring tone he can. "The warrior units made sure he would get better. The parents made sure he would be ok. You're not leaving anyone behind."

Berthold's head falls back as his muscles lose their power to hold himself up. Armin can't be certain if Berthold can hear himself anymore or not.

He holds his hand tighter.

"Rai--Reiner..." Berthold gasps.

Armin smiles softly. "He'll be fine too. A little depressed here and there but he'll be fine. I promise."

"An.. An..."

Then, Berthold took his last breath.

"Annie..."

The words came out like a sigh. Joy threaded into those final words.

The next moment, it's a complete, deafening silence.

Berthold's hands already feel cold in Armin's.

An icy feeling creeps up to his hands and Armin lashes out. He throws Berthold's hands away and stands up, his heart beating maddeningly in his chest. He has failed. Berthold is no longer a

danger to his loved ones, but he lost the colossal titan. Where can it be? A poor child just inherited this and won't live past 13.

I killed Berthold.

Armin's body shivers, he balled his hands into angry fists.

He was screaming before he knew it.

The rest is a blur in Armin's mind. He can barely remember what happened until his throat is too sore to even talk normally. Until he comes to himself and he has fallen to his knees.

The logical part of his brain tells him he has to move. He has to bury Berthold's body before anyone notices their absence. Armin stands up, his feet shake. He is so out of it That he doesn't hear Berthold's body shaking and moving behind him.

Armin looks down at the half-full syringe.

He is too numb to start blaming himself for not acting sooner and letting the colossal titan slip from right between his fingers. Now, one of the most powerful titans in existence is in the hands of a baby.

The best case scenario, it's in Paradise. Worst case, in Marley. Armin can just hope the baby doesn't somehow understand they have titan powers until Armin's deal with Ymir expires.

Armin crushes the syringe under his feet.

Then he hears a tick.

He doesn't fight the mixed emotions bubbling in his chest. He turns around to look at Berthold again.

"Berto--"

The air wipes past his face. Armin doesn't have the chance to understand it as his skin burns and his flesh melts away under

Bertholds explosion.

"God damn it, I knew this was gonna get out of hand."

Armin's eyes twitch behind his closed eyes. He tries to open them but finds himself far too exhausted to do so.

His fingers want to move but he has no feeling in his fingers. A strange feeling tells him he doesn't have one.

His breath catches in his throat?

What happened?

He was going to bury Berthold and return to camp and make up a horror story about how some titan must have attacked Berthold. It was all for convincing the warriors that the founder would fight back.

But now...

Armin's eyebrows knitted together in annoyance. He should have guessed it, the colossal wouldn't just die without a fight. Is Berthold even dead?

"Don't worry, Bertholds dead and that was his colossal titan acting on self-destruction. But right now, he's the least of my worries!"

That voice...

Has it always been there in Armin's dark oblivion?

Armin understands, with starking clarity, that this isn't his realm of thought. He is passed out and slowly regaining his senses, his sense of hearing the first one that was healed. After a while, he can feel a gentle rush of cold sand on his skin and all his questions are answered.

"Minnie, stop moving, you don't have eyes yet."

Armin opens his mouth to say something, no sound other than a pained gasp escapes his lip and he realizes he doesn't have a functioning throat yet either.

This path's Eren's choice of priority is extremely questionable.

"Hey! Try being in my position for once!" he yells back. His hands cup Armin's half made face. "You're killing me, Armin. Killing me! What were you thinking? Running after Berthold like that??"

Armin slowly shakes his head, he winces at the sudden jab of pain that travels through his spine.

Eren sighs loudly. "You're putting yourself in too much danger, you know. A lot of variables aren't in your hands. There isn't much you can change." he reminds him.

Sand falls on his face, their gentle rhythm reminds Armin of ice and water running down someone's body. Then, Eren's warm hands cup his face and start molding the sand into what it was supposed to be, a face.

His hands run over his cheeks and his lips, the skin makes itself up and Armin gasps in relief when he feels the lower half of his face again.

He raises his hand to touch his lips, almost hesitantly. "Oh.. I uh..."

"Wait, you don't have eyes yet." Eren tells him. He grabs him by his shoulders and forces him to lay down on the sand. Armin lets Eren manhandle him as he pleases. The same cold sand falls on his face and Armin takes a deep, relieving breath.

Eren's warm hands cup his face. His warm and comfortable voice echoes in Armin's mind. Armin has to take a second to compare the two Eren's. His Eren sounds so immature, childish, hopeful and happy. This Eren sounds deep and mysterious.

"You can open your eyes now."

Armin does so.

The path is starless as ever, with the only source of light in this desert of white sand being the glowing tree nearby.

Eren smiles but his smile immediately falls. "Oh..."

Panic rises in Armin's eyes. He touched his face, expecting to have a third eye or no cheekbones, but he found nothing out of place.

Eren chuckles. His hot breath rolls down Armin's face. "Your eyes are a color of mystery." Eren murmurs, his thumb caressing under Armin's eyes. "I can never get it right. Although... This is a close guess."

Armin wants to ask him what it means, but he doesn't get the chance. The moment Eren smiles, the paths start to disappear around him.

The world crashes down.

Armin wakes up.

Hands start to shake his body.

His back is on something... Soft?

And there is light behind his eyelids that's irritating him.

"Wait! He moved!"

"Yes, Eren. I can see that."

"Shut up, Mikasa. Armin, you can do it! Wake up!"

Eren's hands squeeze his hand and Armin's eyes slowly open.

He knows this place, he has dragged an injured Eren into the medical ward to know where it was. Armin's eyes slowly open fully. His eyes focus on the blurry figures of Eren and Mikasa in front of him.

"Armin!"

The same hands that were holding his hand, now fly to hold his face. "Good job, Armin, can you hear me?"

"Your-- You're..." Armin swallows. "Way too loud."

Eren slaps a hand over his mouth and keeps quiet. Mikasa chuckles at that. "Welcome to the land of the living, Armin, I'll go get the doctor." she says. "You have to tell us all about how you survived that explosion..."

"Explosion...?" Armin murmurs, acting confused.

Eren runs his thumbs over his cheeks. "I'll explain everything. Just look at me, Armin. Look at me, please." he pleads.

There is a sharp, needle-like pain behind his eyes but he keeps them open and tries to find Eren's jade green eyes. When their eyes lock, Armin notices how confused Eren is.

"What- what's wrong--"

Eren narrows his eyes. "Your... Your eyes are a different shade." Eren mumbles.

Armin arches an eyebrow. "What?"

"I said your eyes are a different shade!" Eren repeats, much louder.

Mikasa steps into the room with an angry frown on her eyebrows. "The doctors busy but he'll be here for--"

"Mikasa-- Eren says my eyes look different." Armin asks the moment he sees her. He doesn't know what to do with this information that paths-Eren isn't exactly a renowned doctor. Maybe he has to be more careful in the future because he can make Errors with his healing.

Mikasa hums. "I don't know, Eren, he looks the same to me!" she says with a shrug.

"That's because you never pay attention!" Eren argues angrily. He sits down on Armin's bed and takes his face into his hands. His jade green eyes drill holes into Armin's brain. "His eyes have always been the color of the sky mixed with stormy gray clouds. Blue but even more lively than the sky itself."

Ocean .

That's the word Eren is looking for and doesn't know yet.

"And this-- it certainly wasn't this!" Eren growls. "Maybe the force of the explosion hurt your eyes! You should get them checked!"

Armin pulls his head out of Eren's grasp. "I'm fine, Eren." he says. "The doctor should diagnose me, not you."

Eren takes his shoulders and shakes him. "What happened!?!?" he asks. "There was an explosion in the forest and then I found you!"

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line.

Bertholds body exploded.

That's what happened.

Armin sighs loudly. Now is the perfect time to make up a story to make Reiner and Annie think the founding titan did it.

Maybe the story is horror enough, then they'd just leave or be too scared to kick the walls tomorrow.

Armin takes a deep breath. "I don't know..." he hums. "I heard titan footsteps and came out of the dorm... I saw Berthold walking to the forest and followed him and then..." Armin rubs the sides of his face. "Nothing... It's blank... I think I saw..."

Eren shakes him. "Saw what? What hurt you?"

Armin shuts his eyes. "Don't tell the authorities but I saw a humanoid titan. It looked too much like a human with a calm face and purple eyes..." Armin swallows hard. "Or maybe I dreamed. I don't remember things exactly."

Mikasa frowns. "You're probably just hallucinating." she tells him.

Yes, Armin has done enough to spark a rumor. "Yeah. Probably."

Eren hums. "No. I believe everything you say. If you say there is a titan. Then there is a titan inside the walls." Eren says, overly confident. "We must tell the authorities."

Armin eyebrows move up until they disappear in his bangs. Since when does Eren believe Armin's every word wholeheartedly?

"Eren. No." Armin says. "It has more trouble than not."

Eren takes a deep breath and lets his hands fall on Armin's sides. "Ok, if you say so."

Eren doesn't say anything else as the doctors come in to inspect Armin. They kick the two of them out and Eren goes after Armin and sends him a glare as warning.

The doctors search every inch of his body for a burn but find none.

They are quite surprised.

Armin is discharged with smart remarks about how he didn't have a scratch on his body.

They left Armin alone and told him to get ready.

Armin runs his hands over the smooth outlines of his new jacket. He is told that although his body was completely healthy, his clothes were burnt off.

Armin flinches at the thought of being found in the jungle with burnt clothes and half naked.

He puts on his new clothes and practices shrugging off the questions he is going to be asked.

How did you survive?

What happened?

How are you healthy?

Well, he can't tell them he is from the future and made a deal with founder Ymir to come back in time. Only for her to betray him and send him so far back.

He certainly can't tell Eren the reason he is healthy is because his alternative self is waiting and fixing him in paths each time he is near death.

So Armin is in his hospital room, changing into his cadet uniform and putting his ODM around his body. He has a shift today after all. Homework will be good in putting his mind at rest.

Or maybe even forget about last night's disaster.

There is a knock on his door. Armin quickly puts on his jacket and says: "come in!"

Reiners heavy footsteps, coupled with Annie's soft ones, echo in his room and Armin freezes for a moment.

He stares at their faces.

Reiners eyes have dark bags under them and his eyes look hollowed out. Annie looks more composed but she looks paler and thinner than last night.

After all... They probably know...

They probably know about Bertholds death. They have probably recognised the explosion pattern and are here for answers.

Armin shuts his eyes. Then open them. He must not show any guilt.

"Hi, Reiner, Annie." he nods at them. "Are you... Are you two ok?"

Reiner narrows his tired eyes. "Berthold was killed in the explosion that you survived."

Armin gasps, he covers his mouth with his hands and blinks in surprise. "Oh no..." he murmurs. "Did he--"

"We haven't found any remains yet." Annie says with a sigh. "So we need to ask you, Have you seen Berthold?"

Armin freezes for a moment. Just a moment, to take a deep breath and slip a facade up to his eyes. Armin turns around with a confused look. "I think I did. Yeah I did. My memories are pretty blurry and don't make sense."

Reiner hums. "Like what?"

"I remember I came back into the dorm because I couldn't go and give the omelet to my grandfather..." he sighs. "Then I saw Berthold going to the forest in the middle of the night and I--"

Armin shook his head. "I called him but he couldn't hear me." he sighs. "I followed him and I.... Uh... You guys won't believe me."

Annie steps forward. "Try us." she says.

Armin shuts his eyes. "I- uh- I saw a titan." Armin says with an awkward laugh. "A titan with purple eyes and human hands and legs and..." he swallowed hard. "Human behavior."

Annie and Reiners eyes flash.

Ah, took the bait I see.

Armin looks at Reiner and Annie as he continues. "I think it's all a hallucination, you know, because I don't remember anything else. Just waking up here and boom..." Armin shrugs. "My memory is blank."

Armin laughs awkwardly. "It's ridiculous!" he says. "Like hell! Titans can't be inside the walls!"

Annie and Reiner exchange a look.

A look of something Armin can't interpret. Their expressions become even more troubled. "Thank you Armin." Reiner says and they both storm out before Armin can say anything else.

Armin reaches for them but they are gone before he can stop them. His hand freezes midair.

He stares at the closed door.

Yeah...

Armin smiles, smiling wickedly.

that's enough to convince Annie and Reiner that somehow the king got rid of Berthold .

Armin's hand falls on his side and he nudges his chin high.

At least they are afraid of the founder now.

at least this... Is a mission success.

"Armin, are you sure you're good to stand up again?" Eren murmurs, he runs around Armin in circles to find anything suspicious, he finds none.

They are under the wall of Trost. With Mikasa next to them, Surrounded by the lively sound of people and markets. Armin arches an eyebrow. To Eren's eyes, it's as if Armin walked out of a devastating explosion without a scratch.

Armin pulls his ODM harness until it fits against his body. "Im fine, Eren.." he murmurs with a loud, long sigh. "Just a little shaken, that's all."

"Come on, Armin! Nothing will happen if you skip this shift and spend the graduation ceremony resting!" Eren suddenly bounces forward and takes both of Armin's hands into his own. "I'll even stay with you."

In the corner, Mikasa rolls her eyes. "Eren, don't be ridiculous."

Eren snaps his head towards her. "Look who's talking? Ms I-am-the-strongest."

"No, she's right, Eren. Tonight they'll announce the top ten and you guys are probably among them." Armin says. "You should concern yourselves with that."

The three of them move to the elevator, slowly walking. "It's not like I want to join the MP. I don't care." Eren says. "I've learned what I needed from shadis. I don't care about the grades he gave me."

Mikasa rolls her eyes.

"I bet Carla will be overjoyed if she finds out her children are in the top ten." Armin says.

Mikasa smiles, a small smile that could easily be overlooked. She shakes her head and wishes them a small goodbye. She has her shift elsewhere after all. Eren and Armin wave at her and go on their way to the top of the wall rose.

They spot a large group of cadets walking in the city, chatting and talking loudly. Armin narrows his eyes and realizes he has never seen their faces before. "Who are they?" Armin asks with an eyebrow raised.

Eren puts a hand on his shoulder and pulls him closer. "The eastern division of the 104th." he says simply. "With the explosion... The military thinks the south needs more help so they sent them."

Armin hums, he watches the crowd with sharp eyes. His mind runs off deciding if it's a good thing or bad. The new cadets chat and laugh amongst themselves, almost too excited for how hectic this scenario is.

Eren pulls Armin closer, he turns them around and back towards the wall. "Meh. Let's get going. Forget about the elevator." he says. He takes his hand off Armin's body to grab his ODM gear handles. "I bet they had enough fun not knowing who shadis is."

Armin can't disagree with that.

He grabs his ODM too and flies up to the wall. They land right above the gate where they are supposed to help with the maintenance of cannons.

Connie is waiting for him with his holding two dusters. "Great! You brought help!" he pushes one duster in Eren's hand and the other in Armin. "Glad to see you're ok!"

Armin smiles. "Thanks..." he hums. "I still don't know what caused the explosion..."

Connie takes a deep breath. "... And there is still no sign of Berthold." he exhales loudly.

Armin closes his eyes.

If only you knew...

"Ok! No messing around." Eren loudly claps his hands together and gets everyone's attention. "I'm sure we are all affected by Berthold's death but we must stay strong."

Eren looks at everyone in their eyes.

"We're soldiers! The authorities are looking at it! We'll have to trust in their capabilities."

Connie nods with a sigh. Samuel nods too, so do Mina and Thomas.

"Guys, don't tell anyone!"

Everyone turns around to look at Sasha, who slowly walks up to them. She giggles. "But I made myself at home in the commandant's office." she says, licking her lips like she was dreaming. Her hand goes to her coat pocket and takes out a fresh bag of meat.

The group gasps.

"SASHA!" Connie yells angrily. "Shadis will absolutely kill you!"

"I know..." she whispers, her voice wavers. "But thinking about all I can eat with this makes my mouth water...." she shakes her head as she puts the meat in their food supply. "Totally worth it."

"Then I want a slice!"

"What?? So I want one too-"

Sasha laughs and stands up. "Oh well... It's ok, once we get out land back, we have all the space we need for livestock!"

"Ok! Now let's get back to work everyone!" Connie yells.

Eren spins the duster in his hands and goes at a cannon. "Well, Armin. Let's start the most boring activity ever."

Armin smiles at him.

His tension breaks and he allows himself to take a deep breath.

There is no Berthold to interrupt their peace this time.

Armin's eyes widen at how relieved that makes him feel. There is no Berthold to break down the walls. No Berthold to kill his friends. No deaths for Marco, Mina Thomas, Ba--

"I hear footsteps!"

The group stilled.

At first, Armin thought she meant that she had heard human footsteps. That Shadis has found out about their little scheme and has come to punish them the last moments he could.

But suddenly, Sasha jumps, she draws out her ODM blades and points at the horizon, fear written all over her brown eyes. "Titan footsteps!" she yells. "Coming from the south."

Armin snaps his head towards the south. All of the others stop their activities and stare at the south.

Silence is all he hears for a few seconds.

But after that, the ground started to shake. They shake uncontrollably and Armin's body shivers because he remembers this shaking of the ground.

And then, he sees the armored titan in the horizon, with a hoard of titans following it.

Armin's eyes widened.

Reiner.

The armored titan is running towards them as fast as he could.

"Shit! Is that the armored?"

"Yes..." Eren growls. He quickly pulls out his blades and Armin is too shocked to stop him.

Armin takes a sharp breath and shouts. "SASHA! Go alert the garrisons! CONNIE, THOMAS, start the evacuation notice NOW!"

He wiped his hand in the air. "We need to start the evacuation process NOW!"

Everyone rushes into action.

It's only two minutes sooner than the walls break. But two minutes is two minutes.

He underestimated Reiners resolve.

Armin shuts his eyes, the sounds of man eating monsters echo all around walls and Reiner keeps running until--

This... All this... All this is my fault.

And then--

Armin grabs his ears, he pushes hard to prevent any damages and kneels down. The walls shake as Reiner barrels through them, the gate of Trost is shattered into pieces. It makes the ground under Armin's feet shake.

Miscalculated .

Woah! That was alot!

Lets just hope Armin doesn't have to kill Annie in the same fashion as Berthold...

Y'all! This is my twitter where I post nonsense!

Twitter: @[Rose_lily_sun](#)

XD

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Of what might

Chapter 6: Of what might

The wall of Trost is no more.

Titans are coming.

Armin realises these moments Eren has to go through, but there is a surprise waiting for him in the end of the day. Something he never expects.

Hello y'all!

Hopefully, I'll try to get the 8k-9k chapters routine so it wouldn't be too long or too short. No promises though!

Thank you all for reading, especially those who leave a kudos or comment, you all make my day <3

Anyway, enjoy!

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

deaths, being eaten alive. Normal season one violence.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Armin can't believe his eyes.

The armored titan is running.

He is running towards the walls with his full speed, his footsteps shake the earth and the walls. guessing by his speed and distance, They have exactly two minutes of headstart thanks to Sashas magnificent sense of hearing that alerted them.

Armin barks the orders before he remembers who *he isn't* .

But others obey his words and scramble to the duties Armin barked at them.

It takes less than a minute and the evacuation notice is echoing all across the cities.

Armin sees Reiner getting closer. And of course, he covers his ears and kneels down, he doesn't want to fly away once Reiner hits the wall with full force.

DANG

DANG

DANG.

Armin is somewhat relieved when he hears the evacuation notice and the people who start running towards the exteriors.

Armin can hear parents shouting at their children to move faster, and can see the crowd from the corner of his eyes.

"Eren, Let's--"

Armin turns around but all color leaves his face when Eren jumps down towards the running Armored titan.

Armin reaches for him but he's too far to grab his elbow and shout at him that jumping at the armor is nothing but stupidity.

Time slows down in Armin's mind.

Eren jumps down, his blades ready and held up. In a perfectly aimed attack, Eren swings down. His jade green eyes are filled with determination.

"Die you deviiiiil!" Eren yells as he brings his blades on the armored neck.

The moment his blades hit the protected nape of the Armored titan, they snap in half.

Eren is frozen, he barely has time to react because the broken blades are now a deadly threat to him and not the titan.

The blade flies back to his face.

Eren is yanked back just in time. The blades pass his eyes by an inch when an unknown force pulls his back from the armored and back up at the wall.

"Idiot!" Armin yells as he pulls Eren back at the wall. It was one big stroke of luck that Armin wrapped his arms around Eren's chest and pulled him back right on time.

They fall on the surface of the wall and roll a few times on the ground.

Then, the armored has broken through the wall. It makes the walls shake and makes Eren jump to his feet.

He inches to the corner of the wall and stares down at the titan with wide eyes. Eren crawls over to the edge. "It's skin just-- just snapped my blades..." he mumbles. "Then that means... The cannons..."

The armored looks up.

The body moves like a robot. He pulls his head down and then he's gone in a large steam.

Just like last time.

And then...

Armin tries to pull himself to his elbows. The blow did numbers to his back and his spine hurts with the littlest movements.

Armin freezes when he hears a roar of pure titans.

they're here...

they're roaming in the city...

damn it!

we don't have any thunder spears to repel them safely!!

"Armin!"

Eren falls to his knees next to him. One of his hands supports his neck and his other takes Armin's hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "Are you ok?" he asks. "Sorry, Sorry, I didn't know my blades would snap!"

Armin blinks in surprise.

His blue eyes stare at Eren's jade eyes and find nothing regretful. Why...

"Eren... Are you apologizing?" he asks, surprised.

Eren nods. "I'm sorry." he hangs his head low, ashamed. "You're hurt because of me, I'm sorry."

Armin slowly sits up. The sounds of pure titans are getting closer and closer by the second.

"You did what you had to, Eren." Armin reminds him. He stands up fully and looks at the horizon. A hoard of titans of different shapes

and sizes are dangerously close. "Don't think about it right now!!"
Armin yells. "we should start the protocols.."

Eren narrows his eyes and nods, a small smile on his lips.

Armin jumps to the storage and opens it. Eren fixes the damage to his ODM gear and looks down. He sees no one in the streets.
"Good, it seems the evacuation has started already." Eren murmurs.

Armin pulls the ropes from the box. He looks down at the broken pieces of the wall and at the approaching hoard of titans. A chilly feeling rises to his hands.

Last time... He came dangerously close to getting eaten twice when trying to save Carla and his grandfather.

And now... He has failed to stop this disaster.

He might as well paint Marco, Mina, Thomas and 500 other soldiers as dead.

He fists his hands.

No.

Not again.

Armin grits his teeth and covers his ears. He pushes hard on his scalp as he forces his lungs to expand and take in their air. The pressure on his head is calming, hurtful but calming.

And then, suddenly warm hands take his hands away from his head. Fingers push themselves into his hair and gently lead him to rest his forehead against someone else's.

Armin suddenly opens his eyes. Eren's hands tense and he keeps him in place. "Stop worrying. It'll be ok. It's not like last time." Eren says, his breath dances over Armin's skin. Armin hates himself for reacting to it, but his tone calms his mind down.

Thump. Thump .

The sounds of titan footsteps are the last straw to Armin's patience.

"We're trained soldiers. We can do this." Eren says, his lips pull into a smirk. "Those titans better run from us."

Eren chuckles.

Armin doesn't laugh.

Armin pulls back against all his heart telling him to just stay there.

Thump. Thump.

Armin pulls back and takes a deep breath. "I'm better now." he says and then his mind remembers what the protocols are. He points at the nets and ropes in Eren's hands. "Now let's somewhat cover that hole before it's too late."

Eren nods.

Armin takes one side of the net, Eren takes the other.

Together they jump down the wall, aiming to cover the hole with a net before the titans arrive. This way, the people nearby have at least five minutes to escape the jaws of death.

Hopefully, that'll be enough.

Annie is waiting for him in the camp.

Reiner had to cover his face with his hood until his titan marks faded. Thankfully, no one noticed in the mayhem of people evacuating trust.

Annie grabs him by his elbow and pulls him into an empty room the moment he steps back in base. Reiner goes along with her, Annie may be perfect at hand to hand combat, her body isn't strong

enough to pull Reiner around and Reiner doesn't want to be a victim of her anger again.

She pushes him into a room and locks the door. She growls in anger and frustration, her crystal eyes burning with emotions Reiner can't quite name. "I was hoping you would get eaten." she says, seriously.

Reiner pulls down her hoodie and reveals his steaming face. "Well, too bad I didn't." he says with a sigh.

"This was a mistake!" Annie takes a deep breath. "We can still take whatever info we have and take it to Marley. Tonights the full moon. They should be waiting for us at the port."

Reiner narrows his eyes. "Empty handed like this? No." he says simply.

"Yeah, like we can go toe to toe with the fucking founding titan!" Annie yells, throwing her hands in the air. "You want the same stuff that happened to Berthold to happen to us, huh??"

Reiner hits the dust off of his uniform. His brown eyes become emotionless and cold as they look in his hands.

"We can and we will." he vows. "Now that he has made himself known. We should lure him out."

"And get ourselves killed!?!?" Annie yells.

"We have to finish this mission no matter what!"

Annie fists her hands angrily, blood busts in her eyes and she fails to make the boiling sensation of anger go away.

"No! I won't stay here like this with you as a suicidal leader!" She raises her hand and aims a punch at Reiner's jaw. Her smaller body acts to her advantage and Reiner doesn't see it coming.

He falls to the ground with a wound on his lips and his teeth broken in some places of his mouth. Reiner narrows his eyes and covers his mouth with his hands as his wounds start to steam.

"Let's do what we should have done in the first place!" Annie yells.
"Let's go back! I don't care about this stupid mission anymore."

Annie points his threatening finger at Reiner. "I won't let your stupid ego kill me like it killed Berthold."

Reiner spits out a bloody tooth. He slowly stands up to his feet. "No, Annie. This isn't about me. It's about the founder." he says. "He's the one who's pushing us in this mess. And if he wants to show himself then he has to."

"You're not the boss of me. I can leave this hellhole whenever I want." Annie growls.

"Are you scared, Annie?"

Annie grinds her teeth together.

Reiner wipes the blood on his lips with the back of his hand. Another round of steam and the wounds are completely healed. Reiner's eyes look at Annie devoid of any emotion, empty of any feeling. His warrior side creeps up and pushes all his mind away. "Founder pokes us for the first time... And you are scared."

Annie clicks her tongue.

She turns around on her heel and unknowingly stomps her feet as she moves away. Then she stops at the doorway and grips the door tightly. "I wish..." she growls. "The founder just eats you whole. If he does, I won't lift a finger to help."

Annie hits the door closed, the loud sound of it echoes all around Reiner and the empty storage room.

"Good job, you two!" the garrison shouts. He looks at the tent while the other garrison members of the vanguard get the canons ready.

The titans are dangerously close.

Now Armin's ears can't hear their footsteps because it's everywhere now. Echoing all around them.

Their smiling faces as they walk to the wall, the stench of death in their mouth.

Eren clicks his tongue. "What now, sir?"

"Now both of you, report back to base and explain everything you saw for the armored. We need to keep an eye on it in the elite squad even if it has disappeared."

The garrison swings the blade in the air. "Now go!"

Armin and Eren exchange a look before they jump and fly with their ODM to the base. When they land in the yard, the instructor and a garrison captain are already shouting their orders. They both stand in line.

"Middle guard will be protected by you cadets." the captain shouts, Armin can see him sweating. Can see his hands shaking. Who thought this man could be a capable leader?

"And the elite will protect the back and the evacuation center." he shouts. "Also, keep an eye out because from our latest observations, there are alot of abnormals coming this way!!"

Armin licks his lips.

He finds himself dully stoic against all the information shouted his way. He remembers how scared he was last time. How he was counting the moments for it to just be over.

Now... He felt like that captain was just reading the news.

Armin sighs loudly. *Is that how Eren felt? When he knew the future?*

No. That's a dangerous thought. And Armin refuses to let his mind think about it anymore.

The cadets are dismissed and Armin and Eren both have to refill their gas tanks. They unknowingly get separated and Armin realizes this fact when he looks around and notices Eren isn't behind him.

He has to take a deep breath and remind himself they are in the same squad. Nothing will happen to Eren without him seeing it to its full extent.

Armin's hands don't shake when he fills his gas tank this time.

He does it calmly because he has more pressing matters in his mind. He hits his ODM gear just to hear the jiggling sound of a fully stocked ODM gear.

Then, his eyes start searching for a certain freckled dark haired boy. Armin catches the sight of him almost immediately. He was walking and checking his blade storage one last time.

Armin jumps right in front of him. He can't find it in himself to be slow or calm down. "Marco! Finally found you!" he murmurs.

Marco smiles, but he can see the beads of nervous sweat on his face. "Ah, Armin!" he greets back. "Good luck today-- Stay safe. I have to go to my squad--"

"Marco... Uh... Can you come with me?" Armin murmurs. He adds a tad bit of fear into his voice, just enough to ensure the others' attention.

(Armin hates the fact that others knew his weaknesses. He hates the fact that he was so easily fooled by it even more.)

Marco's eyes soften. "Armin... We're on two different squads entirely." he says. His comforting hand lands on Armin's shoulder

and squeezes. "take a deep breath. You'll survive this."

Armin opened his mouth to say something but he was interrupted by a loud shout.

"MARCO! We're off!"

Both Armin and Marco turn to where Reiner is shouting from. Armin's blood runs cold... They are... They are his teammates?

No wonder. No wonder he finds them out.

Marco's teammates are Annie, Reiner and two other boys he's never seen before.

He locks eyes with Annie. She suddenly turns away and narrows her eyes at the ground she mumbles something Armin can't hear. Reiner elbows her and they both stop whatever they were saying.

And then, a chilling realization settles on Armin's heart.

Marco pulls him into a hug and hits his back. Armin's eyes stare dumbly ahead.

Maybe his death is one of those he can't stop.

Armin swallows hard.

Marco lets go of the hug and smiles. "Take care! I'm sure I'll see you soon."

Then he runs to his squad before Armin can ask him to stop.

Up until now, everything has been royally screwed.

Armin stands up here, with his squad and Eren. He has failed to keep an eye on Marco. He has failed to stop the walls from breaking. He has failed--

But how...

how in the world...

what the hell am I even able to--

Armin stares ahead at the burning city.

He wonders... What have the titans done that has made a house burn?

maybe...

maybe I'll have to let the events unfold .

Armin swallows hard. Even the thought makes him angry.

"You know Armin. This is a good opportunity don't you think?"

Eren's voice cuts through Armin's mind like a knife. Armin's mind blanks immediately and he slowly looks at Eren.

Eren has a smug smile on his lips. He puts his hands on his hips and winks. "You see... If we kill enough titans, we can skip the rookie status altogether in the scouts." he says, then points at the destruction and havoc behind him with his thumb. "So, what do you think? How many can we kill?"

None .

But Armin doesn't say that outloud.

Mina steps. "Oi, Oi, you two, keep some for the rest of us!" she laughs.

Thomas takes out his blade with a loud whoosh sound. "Yeah, you two aren't the only ones with a plan of joining the scouts."

Armin's shoulders fall.

He forces a bitter smile on his face.

you can't change a thing.

"Yeah..." he says, looking up at the rest of the group. "We can do this."

A garrison shouts that they should go forward. So they do. Their squad jumps forward with loud battle cries and too loud enthusiasm.

Armin has an eye for the abnormal that will jump at them because of their ridiculously long jump and then--

Then land on a roof.

Armin's eyes widened. An abnormal just jumped at them and missed Armin by an inch. His eyes didn't even see it!

"THOMAS!"

It's Eren who shouts it. Armin first looks at Eren who is dangling from the roof with one hand and then at the abnormal--

Right on time to see him swallow down Thomas' shocked body.

"NO YOU DON'T!!" Eren is gone in a blink of an eye.

Armin reaches to stop him but Mina follows him. She shouts: "don't go alone!!" and Armin doesn't even have the energy to stop her.

"EREN!"

Armin falls to his knees because a titan jumps from the ground and bites Eren's foot off of his body.

Armin falls to his knees.

His eyes and ears are indifferent to what's happening around him. He doesn't care that Mina was slowly being swallowed whole. His

mind filtered them all out.

Colossal titans march in his vision. Pure titans get crushed under their feet after eating whatever there was left of the marleyans. Jean is among them, Connie is among them. He has lost sight of everyone and is in the bony hands of Eren's founding titan, watching everything unfold.

When he comes to, the hands that are holding him are very much flesh and blood, very much humanoid and terrifying. Armin has a moment to scream before he's being thrown in a bearded titans mouth.

It's just as he remembers it. His hands try to latch on to something to save himself but the grimy, wet substance of a titans saliva doesn't allow him.

Until--

Out of nowhere, his hand is yanked and he's stopped momentarily from falling into the titans stomach.

He sees Eren's bloodied face and for a moment-- everything stops.

Eren grinds his teeth together and throws Armin out of the titans mouth. Armin feels his back collide with the roof, he rolls a few times before he struggles to his feet again. "Eren!" he yells immediately and looks up at Eren, who was trying and failing at keeping the titan from biting down.

Eren's hands shake as he reaches his hand towards Armin. "Armin... We will... See it..." Eren struggles to say, his eyes barely focus on Armin's face. "Flaming water... Fields made of ice... Oceans... We need to see all of it--"

Armin jumps to catch Eren's hand and pulls him out, the adrenaline is fresh and pumps in Armin's veins like no other. Armin grabs Eren's hands and he tries to pull him out, forgetting all about fate and what was supposed to happen here.

And then, the titan bites down.

It cuts Eren's hand from above his elbow, it knocks Eren's head too. Armin falls back and looks up at the titan just in time to see it swallow down.

Armin freezes on the spot.

His body refuses to move and do anything other than stare at the bearded titan as it moves away. His breath caught in his throat, his ears unable to hear anything other than the rush of blood in his ears.

SNAP OUT OF IT!!

EREN IS STILL ALIVE!!

He screams at himself, his anger is what pulls him out of his trance and makes him stand up to his shaking feet.

The titan is moving away, his back to Armin, and taking small but certain steps towards the next human it wants to devour.

His hands reach for his blades and he slowly takes them out.

That titan is alone...

I'm weak but if I kill it...

maybe I can pull Eren out...

Then he stops himself.

The world has gone far enough, Thomas and Mina's death hangs heavy in his heart and makes him think...

He thinks maybe he can't save everyone.

Maybe he has to select a handpicked few and stick to them because his whole race is doomed to die. Maybe he can save a few, but everyone?

So he narrows his eyes at the titan, maybe I can pull Eren out and retreat to the walls, he'll think about the details of what to do next later and--

No! Eren needs this!

A small traitorous part of his brain murmurs. Eren's growth and power has always been in tune with his pain, with how much he suffered and grew. If I even manage to pull him out, he will never learn to turn into a titan.

Armin shuts his eyes, and forces his body to relax.

To think Eren was inside a titans stomach right now, probably screaming to the skies, made his heart ache. But he can't do anything.

Eren, please.

please, I'm so sorry.

He doesn't notice the fat tears running down his face.

come back, please.

come out now, I'm not risking your life anymore. Never again. I can't. I can't.

Armin's mind finally shuts down.

He stares blankly at the titan, waits for it to change but nothing happens for a painfully long minute.

Then A titan hand pierces through the bearded titans back and rips it apart, Armin sighs loudly in relief.

He almost falls to his knees, his shoulders slumped forward and his head hanging low. He doesn't need to see the attack titans face. He knows the roar by heart.

Eren titan emerges and roars loudly. He tears the titan apart as he steps into the world for the first time and kicks the bearded titan until it's nothing but a steaming mess.

And Armin can't be more relieved.

How pathetic.

Armin immediately wipes his tears. He almost fell back in that hole. That hole that demanded him to sacrifice everything he had for Eren, until he was nothing. Nothing but an aching soul. He wanted to jump and pull him out of that titan for crying out loud.

How pathetic is that.

Armin stands up and looks the attack titan in the eye. Eren is currently just running on instinct so he probably doesn't recognize Armin as he is.

Armin pushes the blades into his ODM.

Now he doesn't remember what exactly happened the first time around but the world is determined to make it repeat itself, so there is nothing Armin can do.

Armin stares at the attack titan. It has stayed like that since it was "born" and the lack of movement is irritating Armin to say the least.

Unlike last time, Eren doesn't go after the next titan. He turns around. The jade green eyes of that titan focus solely on Armin.

The attack titan starts walking towards Armin.

Armin stares back.

He can't fight the fear that rises in his blood when Eren's giant titan hand aims for him.

Armin jumps back right in time. He uses his ODM gear to fly higher. The titan's hand misses him by an inch.

What the hell?

Eren's titan roars loudly. The sound shakes the building Armin is standing on. The blond's eyes widened in disbelief.

does Eren...

does Eren understand what he's doing??

Eren's titan hand punches the room under Armin's feet. Armin stumbles and falls but he immediately launches his ODM gear and stops himself from falling.

Eren's titan hand tries to catch him in the air. His giant fingers wrap around Armin's left ankle and pull him down.

Armin's heart skips a beat.

His ODM anchors snap loudly as they fall out of place. Time slows down in Armin's eyes just as Eren's fingers wrap around his leg tightly.

Snap.

Armin screams in pain as his right ankle makes a cracking sound under the pressure of Eren's hand.

Armin shuts his eyes and makes a decision. He pulls out one of his blades and slices Eren's finger and frees his foot before Eren can catch the rest of him.

Armin flies away with his ODM. Wind flows on his face faster than it ever has.

An angry roar echoes in the city.

Then the sounds of a titans footsteps follow him.

Thump. Thump.

Armin's blood freezes when he looks back from the corner of his eyes and sees Eren's titan running after him. He reaches his giant hand and this time, Armin is too slow to react.

Eren's titan wraps around his middle and pulls tightly. Armin can't help but scream out. Eren's finger squeezed him just tight enough to hold in an iron grip but not bruise.

Eren brings Armin to his face. Armin gasps loudly, he struggles and tries his best to get away but Eren's fingers hold him tighter in his fist.

The jade green eyes look at him thoroughly.

Eren has no lips.

But Armin sees him smiling in his eyes.

Eren's mouth opens and Armin has a moment to scream. Eren pushes his body into his lipless mouth.

Armin slips and falls into his tongue but he stands back up immediately.

Eren is not in control! He doesn't know what he's doing! His mind yells at him. Stop him! If he eats you- he'll never forgive himself!!

"No! No you don't get to eat me like this!!" Armin yells, he stabs his blade into the gums above Eren's front teeth and plants his feet

firmly on his tongue. He summons all the strength he could but even that isn't enough to stop Eren from closing his titan mouth.

The saliva and wet tongue makes Armin impossible to keep standing. He falls to his knees but he keeps trying to keep Eren's mouth open, stopping him from eating him.

Armin has learned the bitter truth that he won't die here. But If Eren finds out he has tried to eat him in titan form, he'll never forgive himself. He has to hang on, not for himself, but for Eren.

Armin's hands start to shake, his knees start to buckle again. He screams out as loudly as his muscles scream and protest.

Eren's titan hands come up and cover his mouth. He aims to push Armin in with his hands, his fingers act like a cage, preventing Armin from jumping out.

"Armin!"

Armin snaps his head back towards the sound. It was Connie and his squad, along with Ymir and Krista, who saw him. Armin could see that the three had actually seen him because Ymir went out of her way to stop Krista from rushing towards Armin. The two landed on a nearby roof.

"ARMIN GET OUT!" Connie yells as he holds his blades high.

A paralyzing sense of helplessness makes Armin reach his hands out and slowly shake his shake. "Don't don't come any close--"

Connie swings across Eren's face, his blades slice Eren's fingers and the digits fall down, blood falls into his mouth and splashes Armin.

He aims to jump out of that mouth now that he has the chance. Armin looks at Connie one last time, right before his body loses the

strength to hold the titans mouth open and Eren's teeth clank together with a loud, heavy sound.

In the wet and slippery dark of Eren's mouth, his muscles contract around Armin's body. Armin screams like a caged animal, no matter how much he struggles, he falls down Eren's throat and into his stomach.

"Our section is clear." Marco yells. "I think it's safe to say we should help the other squads."

Reiner lands right next to him, so does Annie. As the squad leader of squad 39, he should be the one to tell them what to do and what not to do but Marco can't help but feel strange. Both Reiner and Annie rank higher than him and their other squadmate was killed by an abnormal.

Marco flinches away from the memory. He was starting to like him, only for him to end up in the claws of a jumping abnormal titan.

Which reminds him...

"Why are you so fixated on helping other squads?" Reiner asks, his ODM makes a loud sound as he puts his blades back inside. "I say we wait right here before another ambush."

"I know but..." Marco sighs. "Armin's squad is a few kilometers south and I... Worry about him. A lot of titans are coming from that way."

Reiner narrows his eyes. "Marco--"

Annie interrupts him. "I agree with you. We should check them out. If they fail, we'll most likely get eaten too." she points out. Her face doesn't betray any emotions, completely stoic.

Reiner presses his mouth to a thin line.

"You're right. Let's check on them while we can and uh-- let's go slowly." he says. "I don't want anyone else to die because of a jumping titan like Rupert."

Annie and Reiner nod in unison.

Marco flies away, Reiner and Annie right after him. If he isn't mistaken, Armin's group should be just north of here.

He finds Armin sooner than he imagined, but he never thought he'd find him in the claws of a titan, moments away from being eaten.

"Oh my-- is that Armin??" Marco yells. He immediately pushes his ODM gear to fly faster. He's in a good place, if he angles his blades right on time, He can kill that titan before he gets the chance to eat Armin.

And what a titan it is... *Demon* is the first word that comes to Marco's mind while describing the lipless titan with slit eyes and pointy ears.

"Annie!" Reiner shouts after her when she zaps into a corner. Reiner growls angrily and spares a look at Marco. "She found something. I'll see what it is-- take care."

And with that, Reiner flies after her.

Doubt starts to crawl up to Marco's mind because what if it's pointless? His squad was torn apart because he wanted to check up on Armin and now--

The rogue titan, that's what Marco is going to call the titan eating Armin, shoves Armin into his mouth. Armin stabs his teeth with his blades to keep it open. Connie and his squad reach them before Marco can.

No matter how fast Marco flies, he's not fast enough to reach the titan before he has closed his teeth and trapped Armin securely in his mouth.

Connie lands near a rooftop near his squad, Krista and Ymir. Marco lands near them.

"Marco!"

"Connie-- are you ok? Hurt? Was that--"

Connie hisses as he steps back. "Armin, yeah. It's too late now. Armin is still in his mouth but we should leave before we end up right next to--"

The ground shakes again.

Yellow lightning fills the area and Marco and the rest have to kneel down to avoid falling on the vibrating building.

Everyone, including the rogue titan, turns around to see what that yellow lightning and explosion was from. To their surprise they see a humanoid titan with no skin, pink muscles, and physique that went all against what they learned in their cadet training, a female titan.

The female titan sees nothing but murder, Marco snaps his head at Ymir and Krista and yells. "We need to move--"

But Ymir doesn't look moved at all. She narrows her eyes at the female titan and hums. "Don't worry, it seems like these two titans won't attack us." she says, an angry hum at the tip of her lips.

Marco wants to ask why but he doesn't get the chance to, because the female titan grips the rogue titans throat almost painfully tightly.

As if...

As if she wanted to prevent him from swallowing.

Both titans fell down by the impact and destroyed the building behind them. The female titan kept the rogue titan pinned by his throat. Her other hand tries to open its mouth with angry growls.

She manages to open the rogue titans mouth.

And there, rolled up in disgusting saliva, is an unconscious Armin.

Marco has to massage his eyes and look again because the female titan just pokes her finger into the rogue titans mouth to pull him out.

Marco doesn't want to know why these two titans are fighting over Armin and he certainly doesn't care. He holds up his blades, the moment she takes Armin out. He will slice her hand and take Armin to safety. Along with Connie and everyone else here.

After all... He promised.

But that doesn't happen.

The rogue titans green eyes suddenly widened. His jaw gains new strength and he bites down on the female titan.

He kicks her and she is sent flying to the other side of town. The buildings shake again with their poor foundation.

The rogue titan stands up to his feet and makes a very visible show of swallowing down his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows the presumed body of their friend. He roars when there is nothing in his mouth to stop him from doing so.

The female loses it.

She gives a chilling roar of her own and in the next minute, there are titan footsteps all around them.

Marco turns around and to his horror, sees a hoard of titan abandoning their quest and rushing towards them.

"Holy shit!"

"Is she-- is she the titan queen or something?" Krista asks. "They're obeying her!"

"No, Krista. They're not really. Let's just say, our female titan here is a sore loser." Ymir murmurs.

Connie curses loudly, he stands on the rooftop and watches helplessly as the titan that ate Armin whole runs south. It disappeared among the hoard of other titans.

The female titan ran after him, some of the titans ran after her while some stayed behind.

"Did he just--"

"Oi! Connie!" Ymir hits his shoulder. "It's dangerous out here. Let's go if you don't wanna be titan food!"

Marco shakes his head. "She's right." he yells. "It hurts me too but we need to go before the titans she summoned would start eating us."

"Well-- what the hell are you going to tell Mikasa?" Connie shouts. "Sorry, both your friends died because I was too much of a selfish brick?"

Krista jumps in front of Ymir and holds her hands in a T-pose. "Connie, Ymir, stop it! We shouldn't argue like this here!" her eyes travel between Connie and Ymir. "We need to stick together in these challenging times, and if we don't--"

"That's my sweet Krista!" Ymir pulls her closer. "When this mission is over, let's get married, alright."

"That's sweet but we have to get out of here! This place is overflowing with titans!" Marco says. "Head north! Annie and Reiner should be there."

The zapping sounds of ODM fills his ear.

Or well, they should be.

Marco takes off himself. His mind is too heavy with guilt and adrenaline to think about anything else other than the hell around them and the hoard of titans circling around them.

Mikasa stares at the city below her.

There were no titans in her sight, here above the closest church to the gate. She swings her blades in the air and looks at the crowd slowly going in the gate and evacuating this hellhole.

"You did magnificent, cadet." the captain says. Mikasa looks at him from the corner of her eyes and nods.

"I'm honored, captain."

"We have evacuated sooner than expected." he sighs, crossing his arms over his chest. "Thanks to those cadets up on the outer gate when the armored attacked. Those few crucial moments..."

The captain sighs.

"I hope they survived." he says nonchalantly. "There was not enough chance to question thoroughly about the armored titan."

Mikasa presses her mouth to a thin line.

Eren...

She shuts her eyes and pushes her blade back into her ODM. "Thank you. Now I'll help the middle guard in retreating."

"Cadet, Wait!--"

But Mikasa doesn't listen to another voice he says. He jumps down and flies away with her ODM gear.

She has been in the rearguard all this time. She hasn't seen Eren or Armin since they went with their squad. Mikasa's guts tells her

something is suspicious. Ever Since that roar from south, most titans retreated but got stuck in the middle guard, exactly where the 104th was stationed.

That left them with too many titans to deal with. Mikasa likes to hope this didn't overwhelm any of them.

But she is wrong.

From a few streets above, titans are gathered in tight groups and clawing at the bigger homes, trying to get to the people above the roof.

She crosses paths with a few ruined buildings.

She shuts her eyes and just hopes Eren is fine. She raises her blades and gets ready to slice several napes in one go. The zipping sound of her ODM gear fills the air. She slices the first titan and then the next, then the next, then the next before she finally lands on a rooftop with another cadet.

Mikasa studies their faces. Neither of them are Eren so she lets go. She flies to another rooftop and simply looks at the cadets faces, searching for Eren's and not finding him.

She lands on another rooftop, critically ignoring the titans that have them surrounded.

Then, her eyes see someone familiar. Marco is staring at the titans ahead, an empty look in his eyes. Armin used to spend a lot of time with him. Maybe he knows where he is!

She approaches him and snaps her fingers to get his attention. Marco's empty eyes look at her, an automatic smile on her lips.

"Oh... Hi Mikasa.." he murmurs bitterly.

"I know this is selfish of me to ask but, have you seen Eren?" she asks immediately. "Or Armin? They're always together."

Marco suddenly looks around in shame, she blinks in surprise and immediately thinks of the worse case scenario. Before she can come forth and grab him by his collar and demand answers, Marco takes a deep breath and answers her. "I..." he swallows hard. "You can ask Connie how it happened, he got in touch with their squad, but..."

Marco takes a deep breath.

"When I found Armin, he was being chewed in a titans mouth."
Marco mumbles, shutting his eyes tightly. "I'm- I'm so sorry, Mikasa."

Mikasa freezes on the spot.

She grabs him by his collar. "What about Eren?" she shouts in his face. "Don't look away-- what about Eren??"

Or Armin? They're always together

Eren won't sit aside and let Armin be eaten.

Eren won't...

"Woah, Woah, Mikasa, Calm down." Connie rushes to her side and detangles her hands from his collar.

Connie narrows his eyes. "It's not Marco's fault." he reminds her.

Mikasa grinds her teeth together. "Eren." she growls. "Where is Eren?"

"Armin was... Alone... When we found him." Connie explains with a long inhale. "It's safe to say Eren was probably killed before him."

There...

The truth laid bare.

The truth Mikasa didn't want to believe.

Eren...

Eren wouldn't sit aside to let Armin get eaten.

Mikasa's tense hands fall to her sides and she stays motionless for a few minutes.

She takes a long, deep breath to make some noise in the deathening silence in her mind.

Eren is...

Eren is...

"Guys, stop this uproar unless you want the titans to come closer..." that's Jean's voice. He had his arms crossed over his chest and looked down at the seven meter class titan that was trying to climb up the building to them.

He looks back at them and shakes his head. "Do you want an argument about that suicidal maniac to be your final words?"

Connie clicks his tongue. "Come on- it's not the end of the world."

"Pretty sure it is." Jean chuckles. "We are surrounded by titans. If we cross them, we can go to the safety of the wall." Jean says simply. "Although... I wonder what it'll take to pass them."

Jean huffs. "What the hell even brought them here!" he yells.

Marco takes a deep breath. "That... That female titan... They started gathering when she roared." he murmurs. "Maybe they are looking for her."

The building they are standing on shakes. All of them jump to their feet in an instant, falling back to another building behind them. The titans come a street closer to them.

The building shakes and falls.

So will be the fate of all the buildings they are taking cover on if they don't move away from here right now.

But why...

Mikasa will prefer it if a titan just came up to her and found her.

She is just... So tired.

What's the point of it anymore?

There is no one waiting for her--

"Take care, Mikasa."

Gentle hands push her hair into a tie, Carla gives her own hair tie to Mikasa's as she tries to give them a sort of discipline. Carla smiles, her hazel eyes hold nothing but kindness. "I don't like the idea of my children becoming soldiers but..."

Her hand squeezes her shoulder.

"I believe in your strength, Mikasa."

Mikasa's eyes open suddenly.

How can she forget? She owes it to Carla to at least try and fight.

I believe in your strength, Mikasa.

Mikasa narrows her eyes and moves forward to the edge of the roof, somewhere everyone could see it.

"Mikasa?!"

She looks down at the titan and narrows her eyes. She makes a show of taking out her blade and holding it high. "I am strong!" She

yells, holding her blades up, it reflects sunlight in all directions.

"I'm stronger than all of you!"

She swings her blade around.

"I will kill every titan if I have to-- because I have someone to return to." She holds her blade high. "I AM STRONG."

This time, she has the attention of people she has never even seen on her. Mikasa narrows her eyes.

"I will kill all those titans who come in my way." she declares. "You can come with, or sit here until your death comes to you."

Mikasa doesn't wait for their response.

She jumps.

Behind her, Jean presses his mouth to a thin line before he makes a choice. "Fine." he says, loudly. "Didn't you hear her? That's our only chance at getting out of this hell."

Followed by a "come on, you bunch of chicken." from Connie.

Mikasa felt a small spark of warmth in her heart after she heard so many sounds of ODM following after her.

But she focused all her energy killing one titan after another. Each nape she saw, she struck without a second thought. Her ODM was running on top speed and top gas consumption, something she paid no mind to.

She kills and kills and kills.

She kills until she can't count.

She strikes until there is a way out from being surrounded by titans.

And then, her movement is stopped after an ugly sound coming from the ODM gas container.

"Mikasa!"

That is Jean, but Mikasa can't bring herself to pay any mind. She is falling, air passes from her face but she is facing the sky as she falls.

Such a gray depressed sky it is today.

She falls and rolls down the roof.

Her breath knocks out of her lungs when she falls on something soft. The roof of a stall?

Mikasa doesn't have the time to wonder because she quickly rolls down and falls down on the cold hard ground of the streets.

She rolls around and looks at the sky again.

So cloudy...

So gray...

Nothing like it was at home...

Thump.

Thump.

The titans footsteps invade her senses but unlike always, it doesn't fill her with the rush of adrenaline. With the spiked emotions of "do something!"

She just sits there.

And pushes her blade back into her ODM.

THUMP

THUMP.

The titan is getting nearer and nearer. She can see it from the corner of her eyes. She can see the exact moment its features turn into a wicked smile when it sees another meal to feast on.

Mikasa takes a deep breath and looks up.

it was...

I had a good life...

Mikasa waits.

"I'm sorry... Mom..." she murmurs, thinking of Carla who is waiting for her and Eren to come back. "I tried... I really tried..."

And wait...

And wonders what makes this titan especially slow.

She closes her eyes without meaning to.

She dreams of green lands and meadows and purple flowers. She dreams of a lone tree in a meadow, a house.

Her home.

"Miiikaaasaaa??"

Something gently pokes her shoulder.

"Mi-ka-sa." he says, his voice is soft when he tries to shake him awake.

"Shh! Armin! She's sleeping. It's the first time I've seen her sleep since... You know?"

Mikasa knows that voice even with her eyes closed. It's Eren. A childish version of him.

"Besides... We can't open the book with her around, can we?"

What book?

Eren giggles. "Then come on! We'll let her in on the secret one day but for now..."

Eren takes Armin's hand and they run down the meadow.

Mikasa opens her eyes. She wants to run after them, tell them she's not sleeping. But then--

Then she sees Eren smiling.

He's beaming with a childish smile that Mikasa hasn't seen on someone who is capable of killing three grown men.

Mikasa is shocked beyond her young years' understanding.

Eren takes Armin's wrist and they run down the meadow, the sound of Eren's laughter fills the air and Mikasa sees the unmistakable red blush decorating Armin's face as he runs after him.

They do tell her about their secret.

About their book. The book that told them all about the outside world. The book that sends Armin's parents to their deaths.

And yet, Armin still wants to see the world.

Eren still wants to see the world.

Mikasa wakes up with a gasp.

The ground shakes as the footsteps of a titan approach her.

that's right...

Mikasa takes a deep breath as she stands up to her feet.

those two...

have always lived...

The grounds shake as the titan steps closer to her. She can feel her blood pounding in her body, instantly feeling like she has to jump into action.

Mikasa's eyes focus on the ground.

Her body wills to fight.

Her mind doesn't want to.

these two have always lived in their own little world.

Her mind replays the scene of the two of them running down the meadow. Hand in hand, she remembers the red that flashed all over Armin's face and the way Eren couldn't stop smiling.

these two... Had their own path... Their own goals... Their own ambitions...

and they died for them.

it was obvious from the very beginning they would die together like this.

maybe they... They didn't regret anything in the end.

Mikasa's breath catches in her throat.

The gigantic footsteps of the titan stops and Mikasa knows he's stopped to reach for her and feast on her flesh.

And I...

Mikasa's eyes widened in anger. "I'm strong..." Mikasa whispers, remembering the speech she gave to the others. "But... I've always been strong... Because I wanted to protect someone..."

One titan falls to the ground and reaches his hand to take Mikasa.

Now the other is approaching from the other direction.

"But what about myself??"

Mikasa yells that as she. Jumps to her feet and holds her balde with both of her hands. An unimaginable power surges in her blood and she finds himself jumping from the titan to the wall, using both like a ladder to climb up high enough to strike the titan in its nape.

The titan falls.

Mikasa lands to the ground on her feet, the blood of the titan on her face.

I need to find something that keeps me going.

Like Armin and Eren...

She looks at the other titan coming in her way, angrily. "And I can't do that with you monsters around!!"

Mikasa doesn't know how she will kill this titan. She pulls out her last blade and looks for an opening.

She doesn't have to wait.

Suddenly, a zipping sound comes from behind the titan and another person with ODM gear slices the titans nape.

The ashy blond man stares at his own hands when the titan falls to the ground. "I.. I actually killed one." he murmurs in shock.

He wastes no time jumping down and running to Mikasa, sighing in relief when he actually sees her. "Mikasa! You're ok-- did you--"

He stops and stares at the steaming titan behind Mikasa. That's the moment She realizes the other person is actually Jean.

Jean's jaw falls in shock. "Did you-- did you kill that titan? Without- without any gas?"

Mikasa nods. She hits her ODM storage. "Yes.. I finished it all." she says.

Jean immediately looks back and sees the titan slowly regenerating. From their training, they knew they had minutes until the titan had eyes again.

He unhooks one of his capsules and gives it to her. "Here. This should be enough to get us to the wall."

Mikasa takes it. He doesn't bother with putting the capsule back inside and just throws it off the roof. She stands back up again and they both start running.

"I owe you one." she says as she starts running.

Jean laughs awkwardly. "Don't-Don't mention it. Let's just get out of here. Before another one titan makes us his lunch."

Mikasa can't agree more.

They fly across the buildings together, dodging as many titans as they could between the buildings. Sooner than she assumed, Mikasa finds herself landing on the safety of wall Rose.

She sighs in relief and stands up.

"Woah, that was close." Jean sighs, wiping some of the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. "That was a long ride."

"Jean!" Marco runs to them the moment he sees them. "Where have you been! I was worried sick!"

Then his eyes landed on Mikasa and he realized. "Oh..." he hums. "Happy to see you're safe, Mikasa."

Marco shakes his head. "Jean! We almost reported you missing! Are you nuts?? The moment you led us back to the safety of the walls, you dived back into Trost??"

"Hey, I did my duty in leading you guys here." Jean shrugs. He hits Marco's shoulder. "Besides, Causing Moral dilemma is my job, not yours."

Marco immediately looks back at Jean again. "Je-Jean! The refugees they-- I found." Marco swallows hard. "I found-- I found a Kirstein among the injured." he says.

Jean's eyes widened. "What in the--"

"When the armored attacks, a lot of debris fell on houses in the south west." Marco murmurs, trying to soften the blow as much as he could. "I--"

Jean grabs his ears, shutting his eyes. "That's... That's my house..." he says under his breath. He drops his hands and grabs Marco's shoulder. "Where are they??"

"Come with me-- I think I know where to look."

Jean nods and starts running after him.

She feels a little sympathy towards Jean as she watches him disappear in the crowd. She has her own mother to find, among the

refugees, and she hates to think if she is injured or not.

The cold thought spreads through her body like ice. She jumps down the wall and runs towards the cellar where they kept wall Maria refugees. Her eyes look everywhere for a sign of Carla in the crowded area. She asks everyone she comes across about a woman with chocolate brown hair and hazel eyes. Until someone points at the gate of Trost and says she went to get some news about her soldier children.

Mikasa fights the lump in her throat.

She went there to get news about her and Eren.

And Eren...

Mikasa wraps her fingers around her red scarf and pulls it up to cover the lower half of her face. It comforted her, strangely. She forces her feet to move and walk to the gate.

The closed gate had people around it and soldiers who were desperately trying to push them away in case this gate was also broken through.

And then... Mikasa recognises Carla from her hair. She is arguing with a garrison and asking about the cadets. Mikasa can't stop herself. The relief of seeing her is all consuming that she jumps and hugs her from behind.

Carla is shocked. Slowly, she puts her hand over Mikasa's. She sighs in relief too. "Ah... Mikasa!" she mumbles.

The garrison steps back to give them some space.

Carla breaks her embrace long enough to turn around and take Mikasa's face into her hands. "You're here!" she says, her voice close to a sob. "Thank the walls! you're safe, Mikasa!"

Carla pulls her into a hug. Mikasa has to lean down because Carla is much shorter than she is. Carla plays with her short hair and closes her eyes.

"Where is Eren...?" Carla looks around, especially behind mikasa. "Is he... Is he... He's around, right?"

Mikasa swallows hard.

Carla looks around Mikasa. With each passing moment, her eyes shake more. Her hands hold her dress more tightly and her words stutter more and more until it's slurred together.

"Mi-Mikasa..." she gasps. Her golden eyes start to gather tears. "Where- where is Eren?" she asks one last time, her voice breaks.

Mikasa looks down, her bangs fall and cover her face. She doesn't dare say the words out loud. Her shoulders start to shake as she slowly moves her head right to left.

Carla understands.

Of course she does.

Silently, she pulls Mikasa into another embrace born from their mutual need for comfort. "Hush, it's ok." Carla let's shake with her sobs in her arms. She gently pats her hair while Mikasa sobs loudly in her arms.

She can hear the strangers whisper: "well, I hope good ol' Mr Arlert has the heart to hear his beloved grandson died too."

This just makes her hold her mother tighter. Thanking whatever entity that's looking at them that allows her to keep one of her loved ones safe.

It takes exactly ten minutes until the cadets are called into action once again.

Mikasa is reluctant to go when she hears the sirens. Carla is hesitant to let her go. But she eventually does, Mikasa thinks if Carla is strong enough to let Mikasa do her duty, Mikasa is strong enough to actually do it.

At the foot of the wall, before Mikasa has to climb up the wall and join her squad, Carla takes her elbow and smiles at her one last time. "Mikasa..." Carla grabs her shoulders tightly. Her hazel eyes narrowed and serious. "I don't care what happens. Come back to me in one piece." she says.

Mikasa leans down just enough so that Carla could kiss her forehead. The act of affection is by no means rare between mother and daughter but Mikasa missed more than anything in the past three years.

She pulls back and holds Carla's hand on her own. "I promise." she vows. "I'll be back soon."

She turns around. The soldiers push Carla back towards the refugee center when they say their goodbyes. Mikasa takes her ODM handles with a sigh. She climbs up the wall and reports to a garrison. She pairs her up with squad 39 and tells her they are on alert, just in case the armored titan aims to destroy the inner gate.

Mikasa understands their paranoia.

She walks up and realizes the squad 39 that they spoke about is none other than Marco, Jean, Sasha, Connie and Krista.

In other words, what is left of the top ten.

Jean, who is standing a few feet away, mumbling incoherent words under his breath. It is so unlike Jean to stand away from the group and be so lost in thought.

"What happened to Jean?" Mikasa asks Marco curiously.

Marco sighs loudly. "Both of his parents are in critical condition. The debris has hit his father in his head and his mother's wounds have been infected." he recites. "He's been like that ever since."

Sasha and Connie exchange a look. "They've gathered us all for obvious reasons." Connie murmurs, pointing at himself and everyone else. "Do you know what they plan to do to us?"

"I have a better question, really... Are they even going to do anything about Trost?" Marco asks out loud, looking down at the giant walls of the interior. The group collectively looks at Jean. Trost is his hometown after all, he should have been interested in these matters more than them.

Jean arches an eyebrow. Then he sighs and runs a hand through his face. "I don't know..." he admits out loud. "And at this point..."

Jean looks back over at the walls, at the town he grew up in.

"I don't care."

Armin used to think throughout his lifetime, he was lucky to have never been devoured by a titan or found himself floating in a boiling red acid of a titan's intensity. In a titan's stomach.

But here he is now.

The acid makes his hands and feet limb and numb to touch. He can barely move them, or well, he doesn't want to. His mind is so tired that he can't keep his blue eyes open.

Yes... He's glad he never got to be eaten by a titan before. It's a shame it is Eren who does the honors. Armin bets he's not a tasty snack.

The waters get warmer, Armin is engulfed in its steam, floating.

It's only a matter of time now. Before I open my eyes in the paths to a pissed off Future Eren who has to reanimate me back to life .

Armin chuckles, he shouldn't have because some of the acid gets into his mouth. He coughs up the bitter and sour liquid but the taste doesn't leave his lips.

Armin Doesn't know what pushed Eren into swallowing him, or what will happen the next minute.

Armin just wants it over with.

Any minute now.

Any minute, he will be pulled into the colorless realm of the paths, with an annoyed Eren trying to stitch him back to health.

Any minute now...

Unless, he has managed to somehow make Eren give up on him. Armin would praise himself on doing the impossible.

His skin is burning, slowly being eaten away by the burning acid of a titans stomach, or at least, that's how he felt.

His eyes don't work anymore, he can't see anything but darkness, can't hear anything but biological sounds of a body.

A body that is being *digested*...

Any minute now...

Ooops.

Maybe Armin is just too sweet and Eren gave in to titan temptation?
XD

By the way, i messed up the formatting once so if you read the
messed up version I'm deeply sorry.

like always, this is my twitter: @[Rose_lily_sun](#)

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Follow them.

Chapter 7: Follow them.

Armin opens his eyes somewhere he doesn't expect to find himself.

There is a hole that needs to be covered.

GUESS WHO IS IN SUMMER BREAAAAAK.

Annnnnd here comes the last part of Trost Arc! The female titan arc will be super short compared to this one!

Laughs like a maniac are y'all ready for some angst on Erens part? And Mikasa not knowing what she's fighting for. And Jeanmarco break up, lol. No that parts was a joke. I love Jeanmarco but I didn't write anything for it in this fic. Sadly.

no special warnings other than usual brutality of aot applies.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The next moment Armin opens his eyes, he's in a desert of white cold sand and the sky is illuminated by glowing branches.

Armin jerks awake and sits up, white sands falling from his body. He takes a deep breath because he recognises this place. It's the paths.

He's pulled here whenever he's killed and this grown up Eren who heals him back from the most dangerous injuries Armin ever had.

Speak of the devil--

There, Eren is, sitting right there, his back to Armin and staring at the glowing tree. Eren turns around and looks at Armin from the corner of his eyes. "Don't worry, you're not dead this time." Eren chuckles. "I just pulled you here because you were close to a heart attack."

Eren sits back and hums thoughtfully. "Did you know your family has a long line of heart related diseases? You shouldn't put so much stress on your grandpa or he'll die an early death again."

Armin takes a sharp breath and tries to control his hammering heart. He holds his breath for four seconds and then exhales in another four.

He fists his hands angrily.

Of course he is close to a heart attack!

Eren, one the people closest to him, just ate him! And last he remembers he was floating in a vial of red acid and being grilled in a steaming stomach of--

"Goodness, relax. It's safe." Eren assures him. "It's been done thousands of times already. His instincts and past memories told *your eren* -" he says it with obvious spite "-that the safest way to repel titans and keep you safe is to keep you in his stomach. You'll live."

Armin's eyes widened. "But- But why?"

He stands up to his feet but suddenly a white shot of pain invades his senses and he falls down.

"Armin... Your leg is broken, remember?" Eren says. "*your Eren* broke it."

Armin shuts his eyes and tries to sit down. "Aren't you going to heal it??" Armin yells, stretching his leg in front of him in an effort to

relieve the pain.

Eren looks at Armin's eyes and then his oddly bent foot and shakes his head. "You deserve it."

"Hey!"

"Then stop throwing yourself into dangerous situations!!" Eren yells, he turns around fully and grabs Armin by his shoulders. His hold is desperate and angry. His jade eyes are narrowed dangerously.

"What were you thinking!" he shouts in Armin's face. "What made you think manipulating Reiner and Annie into thinking the founder will retaliate is a good idea!?!?"

Armin pushes Eren away. "Someone has to!" he shouts back.

"Not you! Because that's what you get when you put so many others before yourself!"

Armin rolls his eyes. "Yes... Because thinking about yourself worked wonderfully for you last time. It ended the world in shambles, Eren!"

Eren smirks. He rolls his eyes. "Oh really?"

"Besides, the only selfish idiot around here is you!! Why the hell would my Eren eat me! Do I look tasty??" Armin snaps.

Eren smiles bitterly.

"This new Eren you have created... His mind thinks keeping you safe is a higher priority than killing titans." he says, tilting his head.

That makes Armin laugh.

"Stop joking around!" he bursts out laughing. "Tell me the truth!"

Eren rolls his eyes.

He lays down and rests his head on his hands. Eren's jade green eyes stare at the sky. "After all... If you die... You can't see the ocean with him, Minnie."

Armin grabs his hair and almost pulls it out of his scalp. "How can you be so casual!!" he yells. "I almost died because Eren ate me like I'm his lunch or something!!"

The paths Eren sighs loudly. "I repeat... What he did won't hurt you." he says. "I just pulled you here because you... You looked lonely."

Armin narrows his eyes. "How am I supposed to believe that? Of course you'd take my Eren's side! Now I think You're both irresponsible, cocky bastards!" Armin yells, kicking some of the sand out of anger.

Eren covers his eyes in frustration. "Fine. If you were dying, then why didn't I heal you?" he asks. "Don't you feel it every time I make a change to your body?"

That logic makes Armin wait. He blinks in surprise and takes a deep breath. "You could be--"

"Neither of us can hurt you, Not without killing ourselves first." Eren says, his eyes wondering at the starless dark sky of the paths. "I can't Armin... Haven't you learned this from the Rumbling?"

Rumbling?

Armin narrows his eyes. "What do you mean?? What do you mean by this? You wanna send me into a round of mind games?" Armin grinds his teeth angrily. "If you wanna say something-- say it clearly!"

Eren's eyes look up on alert. "Whoops! It looks like *your Eren* is calling you." Eren says with a smirk.

"Don't you dare run from the question--"

"Armin!"

Hands shake his body. There is a glue-like substance on his body and in his hair and Armin suddenly has the irresistible urge to shower.

"Armin! Wake up please!"

Armin slowly opens his eyes.

At first, he sees a blurry outline of Eren's face. His hands shake his body until Armin can see him and the sun behind his head very clearly. "Armin..." Eren blinks in surprise. "Your eyes are different again!"

Armin blinks, his eyes feel strangely dry. He sits up to massage them with a loud sigh. The ground under him doesn't feel like ground at all but a rough bark of a giant tree.

Eren keeps his hands on his shoulders, his grip protective tight. "Where are we?" he asks.

Armin opens his eyes and reality confirms his thoughts. They are on a giant tree, a steaming pile of titan bodies under the tree and the sound of explosions and canons nearby. If Armin squints his eyes enough he can see Wall Rose in the distance and the titans running to it somewhat clearly. "How the hell..." he mumbles. Why did they get so far from the walls? In a forest?

Eren looks down. "I don't know, there is just a titan down there... Did you kill it?" he asks, pointing at the steaming body below.

Armin looks down and to his surprise, the body Eren is referring to is his own decomposing titan body. Armin recognizes the lipless jaws and predatory eyes anywhere.

Armin's eyes widened. "Hold on! I know now!" he yells. "That's your titan body!"

Eren steps back, he points a hand at his own chest with an eyebrow raised. "You mean I killed it?" he asks.

"No! Dummy! You turned into a titan and ate me and ran all across the Wall to get here!?!?"

Eren blinks a few times then bursts into laughter. "Oh my-- oh my god-- have you hit your head somewhere?" Eren gasps and doubles over as he laughs hysterically on that branch. His reaction just makes Armin's blood boil with more vengeance.

"I'm not! You ate me!"

Eren takes a deep breath but he can't wipe the laugh from his lips or his eyes. "Armin, I'm not a titan! Besides, if I ate you then--"

The laughter dies from his eyes as fast as it appeared. Eren gulps down and his hand reaches to touch the red acidic substance on Armin's hair. He touches it and plays with it between his thumb and forefinger. "A-Armin what is this in your hair?" he asks.

Armin sighs loudly. "That's the acid in a titans stomach," he explains. He runs his hand through his blond hair and when he pulls it back, the grime is still on his hand.

Eren laughs again but it's hysterical this time. He fists his hands hard enough that his nails dig into his skin and his knuckles are drained of their color. Eren bites his lips and shakes his head. "NO- HAH! Armin, you're joking right?" he chuckles. Eren tries to stand up to his feet but they fail him. Armin catches him and slowly lowers him down to the branch.

Armin sits down, his blue eyes glaring daggers in Eren's eyes. He hates to be this cruel but Eren needs to face the facts. "Look around." he orders. "Where are we?"

Eren turns his face around, looking at the branches around. Then he found the outer walls of Trost. "Uhm... Are we... Are we near wall

Sina?" is the first thing he says. Then, his blurry eyes see the titans marching inside the hole in Trost.

And he pales.

"Wait... Are we..."

"Outside of wall Rose, yes." Armin finishes for him, "and you brought us here with your titan."

Eren swallows hard. "That's not possible." he mumbles, denial keeps his death grip on Eren's throat, preventing him from seeing reason.

Armin almost growls. *what will it take to get to your dense head !*

"Eren, look at me, I have a broken leg!" Armin yells. He pulls his trouser legs. He hisses loudly when his hands brush his injury. He pulls his trouser leg high enough that Eren can see the injury completely.

To Armin's surprise, there are obvious signs of two giant fingers around his right leg and a bruising right under his knee.

It makes Eren face the facts. Armin is telling the truth and the whole truth. Armin can see the pain of this realization deep in the green of his eyes.

Eren stands up to his feet and takes his blade. Before Armin can have the chance to ask what he's going, Armin walks up to the main branch and cuts some of the thicker and stronger branches.

He sits down and cuts the branch using his baldes.

Eren puts the piece of wood near Armin's injury. Armin pulls his leg back as much as his injury would allow. "What are you doing?" he mumbles, watching Eren's hands move around to cut the wood on the size of his leg.

Eren doesn't look up. "We need to bandage it and keep it still or else it'll get worse." Eren says, almost robotic. "I don't want you to lose your leg- your leg because of my mistake."

Armin opens his mouth to say something, perhaps to tell him it's not his fault, but he fails to form words. Eren isn't listening to him, Eren's eyes are focused and Armin doubts he's seeing or hearing anything other than his own inner turmoil.

He opens his water bottle from his ODM and opens the lid.

"No- Eren we might need the resources--"

But Eren isn't listening. He holds Armin's leg delicately and pours his water on it, cleaning the wound as much as he can. He wipes some of the dirt and grime with his fingers, almost too carefully. His touch is light and careful as if Armin can shatter under his touch.

He sits up and takes off his shirt in one swift movement.

Armin's jaw falls in shock.

Eren sits down and puts the two sticks of wood next to Armin's leg and fixes Armin's leg in place with his shirt. "I'm sorry..." Eren mumbles as he bandages his leg with the wood and his torn shirt. "I'm... I'm so sorry."

Armin hisses when Eren wraps it especially tightly. He knows it has to be like that in order for the made-up cast to actually work, but he can't help but sigh. Why didn't paths Eren just heal him?

Eren knots the loose ends and sits back up, he doesn't raise his face. "Armin, I-- I didn't know. I'm so sorry. I promise it won't happen again."

Armin pulls his injured leg closer to himself. The cast is working, his leg no longer bends oddly when he moves it. It's tight enough to give him some movement at least.

Until they get to safety.

Armin takes a deep breath, it fills him long enough to clear his mind. "Don't be sorry," he says. "I know you weren't at fault."

Eren doesn't say anything, he keeps his head low.

He keeps his head low and doesn't comment.

The silence between them seems awkward and uncomfortable, but it was always Eren who filled in these silences with his jokes or vows of seeing the outside world. Mikasa and Armin just listen.

Now, other than Mikasa's absence, Eren's silence also looks overbearing.

But Eren deserves some space. He just got hit with the reality that he can turn into an unstable titan that can eat his friends.

Armin shoots his eyes and looks back, deep into the jungle.

And then- his eyes widened.

Right there, deep into the jungle, is a big enough boulder that can be carried right towards the wall and cover the hole in Trost!

And since they are going from the outside to the inside, there is a less chance of titans attacking them because a lot of titans in the area are already inside the city!

The smile on his face is impossibly large. "Eren look! There is a big enough boulder right there." Armin says. "If you manage to fill the hole on Trost with it, then it'll be done for."

Eren bites his lips. He rubs the side of his neck, his jade green eyes strictly on the ground. "Armin-- I'm not sure--"

"Eren, we don't have much time for this." Armin snaps. "Soon the other titans around the wall will reach here or the titans inside Trost

will sniff us out!"

Eren closes his eyes.

He opens his mouth to say something but then he quickly closes it.

Then, a cold dread rises to his heart. "Uhm, Eren... Do you know how to transform?"

Eren licks his lips.

"Eren look me in the eyes and answer me!" Armin says, a little too angry.

Eren raises his head, his jade eyes are hollow when he meets Armin's blue eyes. "I think I do... If... If I hurt myself I can trigger a... Trigger the titan." he explains.

"Good, then let's try it!"

Eren holds his hand up and looks at his hand, thoughtfully. "Yeah. Take the boulder. Cover the hole. Go back home, right?"

Armin nods.

Eren looks at Armin from the corner of his eyes. "Armin, can you go stand on another tree? Can you use your ODM?"

Armin blinks in surprise. "I mean... I can try..." Armin takes his ODM handles and sends the anchors flying. He flies away and hits the tree, he uses his ODM wires to stay standing on a branch of another tree.

He gives Eren a thumbs up.

Eren mumbles something Armin can't hear.

Eren bites on his hand.

Armin expects an explosion of yellow lightning and a loud roar of the attack titan but neither come. Eren sits there, biting on his hand repeatedly and angrily. Until he yanks his thumb out and spits it out before he keeps on biting it.

Armin narrows his eyes.

This scene is far too familiar, Eren can't transform. It has happened before, several times. With Annie, with Hannes...

Armin had forgotten how much it took Eren to reach that breathtaking control over his titan. Now though... Something is stopping Eren from transforming and Armin has mere minutes to guess what it is.

Frustrated, Armin jumps down on Eren's branch. "Eren--" he tries to say, reaching out to the other but Eren's reaction is immediate.

He jumps and holds his hand high, his eyes narrowed dangerously. "Please stay back-- stay back." he stutters. "I-I don't want to hurt you."

Armin arches an eyebrow. "Hurt me?"

"Ye-Yeah! Didn't you say the titan transformation came with explosions and light and nada nada?"

Armin narrows his eyes. "Is it now?"

The shake in Eren's hand is suspicious, so are the deep emotions in his eyes. Are they what's stopping him from transforming? Is that--

"Armin," Eren's hand shakes and then he holds it tightly in his chest. His shirtless body strains with his own blood. "Did it... Did it hurt when you... When you were eaten?"

Armin makes a face, his mouth pulls into an angry thin line and his eyebrows frown.

"His instincts and past memories told your eren that the safest way to repel titans and keep you safe is to keep you in his stomach. You'll live"

Armin's eyes widened.

The answer is so plain, so obvious.

Armin smiles softly, genuinely. His mind takes the information like a toddler given their candy.

Eren can't transform-- because he thinks his titan will hurt Armin!

Armin takes another look at Eren's horrified jade green eyes.

Hurting Mikasa was never an issue. He did and gave Mikasa a permanent scar last time. Is this Eren really different?

Does he really--

If this Eren won't abandon him in Marley, if this Eren won't blatantly tell Mikasa he hates him, if this Eren won't beat Armin for standing up for her, if this Eren won't send thousands of yeagerists to their deaths, if we won't crush the entire world and kill his friends--

If we won't do all of that for freedom, then he can be trusted.

If Eren holds Armin a higher priority than freedom.

Armin feels a gentle warmth engulf him whole. Is that why he can't transform? Because he's afraid he'll hurt Armin in his titan form?

Armin licks his lips and smiles at Eren. "Hey... Give me your hand." he says, putting his hand over Eren's bloodied hand over his mouth.

Eren's jaw clenching from his hand, blood trails down from his lips and his eyes widen. "Uhm... Ok..?" he murmurs.

Armin holds Eren's hand with both of his, he takes a deep breath to shake all the tension from his shoulders one last time.

Then Armin puts Eren's hand on his Throat and gently keeps his fingers and thumb wrapped around it.

Eren gasps, he pulls his hand back but Armin's hold is relentless. He doesn't allow him to. His jade eyes are wide and terrified. "Armin what are you doing--" he gasps.

"Squeeze." Armin orders him.

"THE HELL!! Armin, are you out of your mind!" Eren screams. He yanks his hand out of Armin's grip and holds it to his chest. Eren is breathing even harder than Armin. He looks like he's moments away from breaking down, his hands shake and his eyes are tightly shut. "I could have hurt you!" he mumbles.

Armin puts his warm hand over Eren's.

"You can't hurt me." Armin says, too confident. "And if that's what it takes to prove it to yourself, do it."

Eren's hands shake when Armin takes it again. He holds Eren's right hand with both of his own. He can't help but wonder how his titan powers make his skin feel so soft to touch.

Armin never breaks his eye contact with Eren as he puts his hand over his throat. Eren's eyes shut tightly, looking away

"Look at me, Eren."

Eren slowly opens his eyes with a wet gasp. "Why are you still here??" he yells, "you should be running! I-I ate you Armin. Ar-Armin I'm a monster!"

"Well, right now, you can snap my neck and you're not doing it." he slowly runs his fingers over Eren's hands that refuses to move it over Armin's throat. "See? I'm not hurt. And you can control yourself."

"No, No I didn't see a thing because I'm human right now!" Eren snaps. He pulls his hand back as if it is burning. "If I'm-- If I'm a monster capable of eat-eating you and- and--"

"You're no monster." Armin assures him. *not yet anyway...*

But that's the last thing Eren needs to hear.

"Look, your titan form isn't going to hurt me." he tells him. "But if the other titans sniff us out, we're done for. So?"

Eren shakes his head and sighs.

What Annie did was the epitome of idiocy.

She knew it, going away and transforming into a titan in plain sight? There were no recruits in that secluded area but still, what she did was risky. And she knew it. And yet when she saw Armin in that titan's jaws, something drove her to this insanity.

She had missed her female titan form, her movements are still precise and deadly even after three years of no practice. She runs with her pure titan towards the titan that ate Armin and tries her hardest to stop him from being eaten.

She fails.

She summons the pure titans from pure anger and follows the rogue titan outside the walls as long as she can run.

The titan is acting strange, she had never seen a titan that just settles down with only one human lunch.

And his movement...

She narrows her eyes.

The rogue titan is suspicious.

And then, her eyes widened.

What if-- what if this titan is the same titan that killed Berthold and wanted to eliminate Armin because he is the only eye witness!

So Annie chases the rogue titan well outside Wall rose. What stops her is Reiners loud cry of: "ANNIE!"

That makes her stop.

The female titan stops running and chasing after the rogue titan.

She stands up and looks over her shoulders. Even from this far, she can see Reiner standing over the walls, right above the gate, and narrowing his eyes at the scene in front of him.

She looks back at the rogue titan again. If he really is the founding titan, going after him like this is pointless, he can kill them all without breaking a sweat and...

Annie shuts her eyes.

Reiner is right in this.

And she wants to go back home. She wants to keep the promise she made to her father.

So she runs back towards the wall and comes out of her titan. She climbs the walls using her ODM gear and lands on the walls.

Reiner doesn't move, his eyes strictly on the view.

Annie unconsciously touched her already healing titan marks. She stands up to her feet and glares at Reiner. "Want to explain why you just stood there and didn't help me out?"

Reiner crosses his arms over his chest, the aura of command and confidence leaks from his posture. "We couldn't have taken the

founder head on like that," he says. "He can kill us all without breaking a sweat."

"So what? You're gonna stand here until what? Until we give everyone on this island?"

"If I have to, yes. It's painfully obvious the founder wants the people of Paradise dead as much as we want." his angry hazel eyes meet Annie. "If that's what he wants, we'll give him. That's our mission, after all."

"There is no guarantee he'll actually just let us do as we please!"

"Stop pretending to go after him because he's the founder, Annie!"

Annie grits her teeth together. "Armin is the only one who had contact with the founder. It happened once, it can happen again." she growls.

Reiner hums. "Like that's your only reason."

Annie points at the ground, the titans who march in the city and the screams of despair that reach their ears. "You can stand here and argue with me all day, but in the end. Our only link to the founding titan is in that titans stomach!" she yells. "Or else--"

"Stop pretending you wanted Armin for his encounter with the founding titan." Reiner rolls his eyes. "The only reason you went after him is that you've forgotten your duty as a warrior."

A loud series of footsteps echo around them.

It makes the ground shake.

Both Reiner and Annie abandon their argument and look at the horizon.

For a second, nothing happens.

And then, another footstep reaches their ears, piercing the air and dulling all the other voices.

"Can it be Zeke already?" Annie asks, her eyes twitching. "It might just be! Here to see us to our doom."

Reiner clicks his tongue. "Zeke... I don't think Zeke would come so soon."

"Why not? It's been five years. And Zeke isn't exactly a patient man."

Another footstep.

The birds fly away.

And this time, a titan appears from the forest, a large boulder on his shoulder crushing his head. And yet, the titan still is persistent. He moves towards the walls with a clear intent in mind.

"That's--"

"I know."

Annie huffs. "Why is he moving a boulder??? He can harden or order the titans to stop!" she yells.

Reiner's eyes stay sharp. "He can't..." He turns to Annie. "He can't use his founder's abilities. That's why he's doing all this. Maybe his founder's abilities are blocked but he's still fighting. This explains why he couldn't wipe Armin's memories!"

Reiner looks over the canons on the walls. "This is our chance," he says. "A few cannon fires is enough to weaken him and strip him from his titan... We can go home with the titan."

Annie nods, gritting her teeth.

Now that the sounds of footsteps could be clearly heard, Marco understands why they had called only the surviving members of the top ten here.

Marco flew next to his other comrades closer and closer to the gate. They had orders to follow the elite garrison squad for investigation.

And yet--

Marco spots two figures above the wall and he almost pales. "What are Annie and Reiner doing there?" Marco asks out loud. His curiosity wins. He changes direction for the walls.

"Marco! We had strict orders to head to the vanguard!" Jean yells as he goes away.

"I'LL BE BAAAACK!" Marco promises truthfully.

He catches the horrified glances of Sasha and Connie before he completely goes away and heads to the wall. He lands over them and starts running towards the southern gate.

His eyes widen when he sees the silhouette of two humans arguing on the walls, overjoyed, he screams: "REINER! ANNIE! I thought you guys were dead for a second."

The two stop their argument immediately.

Reiner narrows his eyes. "Good, Marco. You have the perfect aim we want." he says, adjusting the conons towards the ground.

"Perfect aim?" he asks out loud.

Reiner nods and points at the ground below. Marco looks down and sees the same demon titan that killed Armin.

He feels a gentle pang in his heart.

"Why is... Why is that titan carrying a rock towards the wall?" he asks.

"We don't know and we don't care." Annie yells and goes behind another canon. "We just need to hit before he gets to do whatever plan he has."

Marco can't argue with that.

Reiner steps back and he stands behind a canon. He has one of the best aims in the 104th, one of the skills he hopes will help him in the military police. But it's different with cannons. They're heavier and it takes time to get a good aim.

He aims a little lower and waits for the titan to come right in the spot. He covers his ears and holds the trigger. "Ok..." he murmurs.

The titan takes another painful step towards the wall.

"Steady..."

"NO STOP!"

Marco's hand froze above the Canon immediately.

He looks up, and his jaw drops when none other than Armin lands above the rock the titan is carrying and shouts: "No! Please stop!"

Marco's hands freeze around the canon. Is that... Is that Armin?

He... He can swear he saw him get eaten by the same titan he's protecting right now.

Armin waves his blades as far as he can. "DON'T FIRE!!"

Marco blinks in surprise. "Is that--"

"That's Armin..." Annie says at the same time.

Both of them step back from the canons, much to Reiners shock. The next second, the walls shake. The three of them fall from the impact.

And then-- it's over in a second.

The next moment, the three of them can only stare at the horizon in shock. Marco jumps to his feet and walks over to the edge. To his equal horror and shock, the titan has cieled the hole of Trost with a big boulder and is currently streaming.

Did it... Die?

Marco blinks in surprise.

He slowly stands up again. "It's steaming... And I can't find Armin anywhere." he murmurs. "We-We saw him right? That was Armin?"

Annie grinds her teeth. "He better have a good explanation when we find him."

"Agreed I--"

But immediately after that, a zipping sound of ODM tells him they are no longer alone. A garrison, a woman in her mid-thirties walks up to them with titan blood all over her body. "You three- you must have gotten a decent look at the man who stopped your shooting right."

Damn it! She knows! There is no denying it.

Reiner, Annie and Marco salute to her. It's Reiner who speaks up. "Yes ma'am!"

"And did you see him? We need him described."

Marco shuts his eyes. "I... I didn't get a good enough look at him. I didn't see him. I just thought he was blond." he lies.

Reiner narrows his eyes. Him and Annie exchange a look. His voice is steady as he says: "Armin Arlert, sir. He is one of the 104th."

The garrison huffs. "So one of the 104 is working with titan?? I knew that the explosion wasn't an accident!"

Marco opens his mouth to say something, to defend Armin perhaps but he finds no words that can keep the other in his line of defense.

Just what are you up to Armin!?!?

Armin pulls a shirtless, almost unconscious Eren up to the walls. Luckily for them, the steam covered them and they escaped without being seen.

Although...

Armin curses his luck. He had to intervene because they had aimed canons at their head and he just couldn't sit back and let Eren be bombarded. He looks at Eren's unconscious body, his body slowly waking to life.

His blue eyes widened.

It is the first time Armin is seeing him shirtless right after transforming into a titan. His titan marks are incredible. They start from his back, from his spine, up to his shoulders and peek up to his face. They quickly heal out of sight but Armin is at awe for them.

Beautiful .

Armin shakes the thoughts he needs to get them to safety before they're spotted like this. Eren slowly comes to life. He pushes himself out of Armin's hold. "Did I-- Did I do it?" he asks, too quiet, too hopeful.

Armin nods. "Yeah. Let's get out of here." Armin murmurs. He holds Eren's hand.

His face is neutral, almost unreadable to Armin's eyes; he stands up and pulls Armin's hands over his shoulders. "We need to get you medical attention."

"We need to get you a shirt." Armin calls back.

Eren doesn't comment. He uses his ODM to fly through the city and climb the inner gate until they are behind the walls. The moment the cadets see them, someone throws a jacket at Eren and he doesn't waste a second to let Armin sit on some boxes and wears the coat.

Armin chuckles. "Now you're modest," he says. "You didn't need to use your whole shirt for the cast, you know."

But his joke fails and Eren doesn't start talking. Armin sighs. He doesn't like Eren's silence. No, that word is too light for it. He loathes Eren's silence.

"Let's find Mikasa first, before--" but Armin gets rudely interrupted.

"Unbelievable. I knew your suicidal head wouldn't die like that!"

When they meet Jean's gaze, he's absolutely stunned and his finger is pointed at them. "Armin- what's with your leg? Marco said he saw you get eaten."

Armin swallows hard.

Yes, that.

How is he supposed to come up with a story now that there were countless eye witnesses? On top of it- Marco probably saw that the titan that covered the hole is the same one that ate him which meant.

"And you--" Jean snaps at Eren. "So much for being a friend. Where were you when your friend was getting eaten?"

Eren pales, he opens his mouth to say something but nothing comes out. His hands start to shake so he fists them and shuts his green eyes, the familiar guilt resurfaces to eat him whole this time.

Armin puts a hand on his shoulders, "it's a long story, Jean. We need to talk to commander Pixys first."

Right at that moment, Sasha and Mikasa walk out from the building. "Jean, the captain was asking for y--"

She stops immediately.

Then, she sprints towards them and takes Eren into a sudden hug. Eren almost falls backwards. Mikasa lets go of Eren when she feels his solid weight and looks at Armin.

She looks horrified at the cast before she takes Armin into a hug.

The contact makes Armin's body freeze and melt at the same time. She leans down and whispers: "you saved him again, didn't you?" she asks.

Armin slowly shakes his head.

Mikasa is close to tears. Armin can tell by the way her body is shaking in their embrace. Armin wraps his hand around her too, returning the hug.

(Eren reaches for them. But when he takes his hand back, he reminds himself that a monster like him shouldn't get close to them.)

Mikasa steps back, she wipes the unshed tears from her eyes. "What-what happened to you two-" she demands. "I-I heard you got eaten!"

Eren rubs the back of his head. "No... I got knocked out and... And..."

Eren kept looking at Armin from the corner of his eyes. Of course Eren was terrified, more from breaking whatever Armin is playing with rather than falling in trouble with Mikasa. Armin licks his lips and prepares himself for improvising a perfectly threaded lie.

"After I got eaten... I tried to claw my way out of the titans body and found Eren there with me in its stomach. So I pulled us up to the wall." Armin explains. "After that, the titan was ignorant to us and went straight to the boulder. He tried carrying it and I realized he probably wanted to fill the whole with it."

Armin shrugs.

"Eren was unconscious the whole time on the wall," he adds.

Sasha blinks in surprise. "No offense Armin, but I wasn't expecting you to be strong enough to cut a titans stomach open." she says with awe.

"Seconded." Jean adds. "I gotta say, good for you to save our suicidal maniac."

For the first time, Eren doesn't react to the nickname. In fact, he is so silent and remorseful, that Armin is starting to get worried for him.

Armin tries to get up but Mikasa's hands immediately push him down. "Armin- you're injured!" Mikasa gasps. She pushes him back against his protest and makes him sit down on the wooden box, stretching his cast leg.

Armin holds up his hand in surrender. "Mikasa- believe me! I'm ok-"

"Eren! Armin-"

She looks at the two of them again and narrows her eyes. "Don't ever try that again! And you-- you better go to your mother because she thinks you're dead right now."

Armin laughs awkwardly. "Sorry, I--"

"Did you know your family has a long line of heart related diseases? You shouldn't put so much stress on your grandpa or he'll die an early death again."

Wait-

Armin stands up immediately, his injured leg can't hold him upright and he immediately falls down, Eren catches him on time. "What the hell, Armin-" he snaps, his hands holding Armin delicately but firmly as he makes him sit down again. His hands travel over his shoulder after he's sat down. "What's wrong--"

Armin's eyes stare at nothing. "My- My grandpa, he has a weak heart and I- And I need to see him before he thinks I'm dead- I don't- I don't-"

"Relax, Armin. You need to rest, we'll tell him you're ok, alright?" Eren assures him. "You can see him soon, too. No need to worry."

"So what was it that you wanted me for?" Jean asks all of a sudden.

Sasha shakes her head. "Ah yes! There was a letter from the hospital that was asking for you-- I think they need a blood transfusion for your mother and wanted to know if you're a match?"

Jean takes a deep breath. "Then. We'll leave these three to their work." Jean says and nods slowly. Sasha takes him to the commander without asking anything else.

When Jean and Sasha leave and disappear from Armin's vision. He lets out a deep breath he didn't know was weighing on his chest.

Eren's heavy hand falls on his shoulder, Eren's jade eyes stare blankly at his injured foot. Armin has known him long enough to know the look of regret on his eyes.

Armin slowly closes his eyes.

This is going to get out of hand.

Armin looks at Mikasa, without any preparation, he says: "Mikasa, there is no time to explain but Eren was that titan."

He doesn't take a breath as he explains with a hushed tone to make sure no one other than Mikasa's ears heard it.

"What do you mean--"

"Armin! Are you--"

They both say it too loud. Armin shakes his head and huffs. "Quiet you two- we're walking on a thread!"

Mikasa sends an angry look in Eren's direction. "And I suppose this is what you're doing?" she whisper-yells.

Eren shuts his eyes, he turns his head away shamefully.

"Mikasa, listen." Armin pleads. "Eren wasn't in control back then but I'm pretty sure he's gotten the hang of it now! He closed the hole in Trost. That alone means he's capable of controlling himself."

Armin tries to stand up again, Eren catches him and throws his hand over his shoulder, supporting Armin to stand up.

Armin smiles at Mikasa. "You needed to know," he tells Mikasa. "But no one, absolutely no one else must know. NO ONE. Ok?"

Mikasa and Eren exchange a look before Mikasa nods sharply. "I trust your judgment." is all she says.

Armin sighs in relief. "Ok... But my leg is still broken and I need medical attention." he admits quietly.

why couldn't Eren just heal him in paths ? A broken leg is a menace to deal with on the field!

Eren haunches him up a little. "Finally!" he mumbles and pulls Armin a little too harshly forward. "You remembered yourself!"

Armin rolls his eyes. "Get going before I change my mind, Eren." he murmurs.

Mikasa follows them, she herself deeply lost in thought. Armin can't blame her. It's a lot of information to digest at the same time. Eren was in a hurry, he carried Armin a little too fast for the injured boy to keep up with.

The moment they see the red and white tent of the medical emergencies, they see six MP officers, in their full gear and eyes narrowed angrily, talking to a doctor.

One of them turns around and his eyes immediately meets Armin's. He doesn't act strange and goes up to his superior. Armin doesn't pay it much mind, his broken leg is taking more of his mind than whatever that MP wants to tell his superior.

But then, everything snaps in place, before Armin can have the chance as much as warn Eren, the MPs are at their direction. Their superior, a tall man with Brunette hair and a goatee, steps forward and stops them from getting closer to the medical bay. "Armin Arlert, step forward, hands in the air!"

The click click sound of guns being pointed at their heads echo. Eren and Mikasa immediately jump forward, pushing him back and shielding him from the MPs view.

Mikasa narrows her eyes, Eren's hand tightens around Armin's body and pulls him closer to his side. Armin sees horror dance in his green eyes.

The MP raises his hand and everyone steps back. The cadets and garrisons in the area immediately retreat. His words are enough to make them whisper and gossip among themselves, circling them from afar.

Armin's worst nightmare, it makes him swallow hard and try to cover his ears from their mean comments.

"Armin Arlert has cooperated with a titan! That makes him an enemy of humanity!" The MP shouts. "And if you stand in the way of his arrest, you will be our enemy too."

Mikasa steps forward, a murderous look in her eyes. She pulls out her blades, making a loud whoosh sound as she spins them in the air and holds them threateningly pointed at the MP and his soldiers. "No, you don't want to make me your enemy." she growls.

Eren steps back, closer to Armin, still covering the MP's view of him.

"If you want to... I can just demonstrate why." she growls, too calmly.

A soldier steps forward and whispers something in the terrified Military Police officers' ears. It doesn't seem to work.

The Military policeman raises his hand and holds it high for Eren, Mikasa, Armin and the audience to see it. "You have only until I bring my hand down. Then, a cannon will kill all three of you!" he shouts, fisting his hand.

No.

No, this is bad.

Eren moves next to him and his blood turns cold. Armin spots Eren raising his hand to his mouth, he starts to panic at the all too familiar gesture.

If Eren bites his hand and transforms, they'll know he's the titan and all three of them will be in big trouble. Armin grabs Eren's hand and forces it down. Eren's eyes widen and he looks at Armin with surprise.

Armin slowly shakes his head. "They can't prove I'm a threat... You on the other hand." he trails off.

"Armin..."

Armin shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath.

"I SURRENDER!" he yells before the MP can bring his hand down and a cannon can be fired in their way. Armin pushes Eren away and stumbles forward. He falls down between Eren and Mikasa thanks to his leg being unable to hold his weight without white hot pain shooting through his body.

So Armin stays kneeling down and raises his hands up. "I surrender." he says again, not having the courage to meet Eren or Mikasa's horrified stare.

"Armin..." Mikasa mumbles, blinking in surprise.

"Go, please just go." he pleads to them, shutting his eyes. "... And remember what I said."

Mikasa opens his mouth to say something. But She slowly steps and looks away. She takes Eren's forearm and pulls him back. Eren is pulled easily, too stunned to speak.

Armin smiles at the two of them, then his ears are filled with the sudden footsteps of the MPs running to him. He feels a hard kick on his back that forces him to the ground and a knee that stops him coming up.

He unknowingly screams in pain when his hands are yanked back and his shoulders are pulled.

"What are you doing!" Eren yells. "You're hurting him!!!"

He jumps forward to tear them away from Armin but Mikasa launches and grabs his elbow. "Eren no!" her hold is too tight for her to break out of and Eren can only snap an angry look at her. "Eren, can't you see--"

Armin and Eren's eyes meet.

Armin slowly shakes his head.

No... Don't...

He mouths those words quietly.

Right before he feels a hard blow on the back of his head and the world goes dark.

When Armin wakes up, his head is dizzy and his hands and feet barely coordinate.

The first thing he feels is a cold touch near his wrists and a new sensation around his broken leg.

He looks down and ah! It's a strict bandage.

So maybe his leg isn't broken after all.

Armin runs his hands over the bandages and ignores the rattling of the shackles.

His bed isn't comfortable, but not rough either. Maybe these beds are the signature look of paradise prisons because they were like this all three times he went to jail.

ah, Jail.

How many more times I'll end up here I wonder...

Armin pulls up his knees to his chest. There are no guards right outside the bars but the gentle tap tap sound echoing around informs him there are close humans nearby. Perhaps just outside that metal door right over there.

Armin stares at it.

His cell has no window, all the light is coming from a torch right outside the bars and their shadow falls on Armin's body and his hands. He can't see the shackles clearly because of it.

Armin's mind starts comparing this cell with the one he was put in after the rumbling. That one was much deeper underground, and it was lit by titan crystals and had much thicker and denser bars. This small cell with narrow bars and wooden ground looks almost charming compared to that.

Relax! It's not like they can execute you!

Armin chuckles at the irony. He hugs his knees and takes a deep breath.

He has one big question.

Now what?

The silence doesn't answer him.

He never thought he'd end up here.

Alone, in another cell, because he helped a titan close the hole in trost. Eren got in trouble for that last time.

Armin lets go of his knees and lays down on the bed. His blue eyes stare at the ceiling. Hooks, chains, and shackles are what is on the roof. Armin laughs at how cliché this cell is. It's designed to mentally drain him, scare him.

But it won't work, not on him anyway.

His moments of silence don't last long. Soon after a while, he hears a screeching sound as the doors of the dungeons open and a shadow walks in with a cane and a fake leg.

Armin stands up. He walks to the bars and holds the cold metal between his hands. "Grandpa..." he murmurs, unable to stop his desperation from slipping into his voice.

When his grandfather steps into his field of vision, he looks as if he has aged years since the last time they met. He comes closer and

takes Armin's hands even with the bars separating them.

"Armin, my boy, you're alive!"

The relief in his grandfather's voice is unbelievable.

"I thought-- I thought you got yourself martyred!"

Armin holds his head low.

Of course, of course his grandfather would hear he is in prison. And as his only family member and former guardian, he has the right to visitation. He can come and visit every week.

It's the very least of his rights that the MPs haven't violated yet.

"You take after your father! Reckless! Blind!" His grandfather whispers. "How many times did I tell him going over the walls is a bad idea? And they ended up right into a cell."

Armin blinks in surprise. He wants to ask because he never knew his parents ended up in jail for wanting to cross over the walls.

Armin's mind blanks.

Last... He just knew his parents were killed by the MPs.

That's it-

If commander Erwin comes down here like he came here for Eren, that's the right bait to get Commander Erwin's attention. Considering it's an experience they have in common.

His grandfather takes a deep shaky breath. "Listen to me, Armin." he says. He pushes his hands into the bars and puts it on Armin's shoulders.

"Your eyes sparkle every time you have a mischief in mind," he says.

Armin laughs awkwardly.

He doesn't have the chance to explain everything, a guard comes in and informs them that the old man's visitation time with "the traitor" is over.

His grandfather puts a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You're a smart man, Armin." he says, his eyes sincere and serious. "Whatever you do, think it over very thoroughly."

Armin nods.

They take his grandfather away.

Something warms his stone heart with the fact that his grandfather isn't disappointed in him.

Carla almost burns down the refugee center when she sees Eren alive and standing.

She was stunned. She froze for a half a minute before she ran to take him into her embrace. By this time, Trost is cleared from titans and they have been sent back into the city.

And that was the moment Eren broke down in the safety of her arms. And both forgot about the burning stove.

Mikasa notices it's the first time Eren really shows his emotions since he came back. No longer stoic and cold.

But the facade slips back into place just as Carla takes them into the back of the kitchen and gives them two bowls in front of them. "Here, have some, you'll need the strength." Carla mumbles as she puts the bowls in front of Eren and Mikasa. The smell of homemade food intoxicates them back to reality.

"Thanks mother!" Mikasa says while all Eren says is an acknowledging hum. He stares at his stew and starts playing with it with his fork. He hits the eggplant and holds it under the stew only for it to bubble back up once he takes out his fork.

"Eren, stop playing with your food and eat them." Carla says. "I'll bring some stuff from the storage and join you shortly."

"Do you need any help?" Mikasa offers immediately. "I can help."

"No dear, you regaining your strength and resting is the biggest help to me." Carla tells her with a smile. She gently pats her hair back into order and gives Eren a knowing smile. She leaves the two alone for their lunch.

Mikasa doesn't let one minute pass. After the first taste of the stew, she's staring at Eren from the corner of his eyes. "Would a smile kill you?" she mumbles.

Eren shots him a disgusted look. "Maybe." he mumbles back. "What do you think they're feeding Armin?"

Mikasa takes a sip. "I don't know. Nothing good. That's certain."

Eren looks down. "I-I should take responsibility." he mumbles. "Armin is there because of me."

"Armin made his choice." Mikasa reminds him. "The least you can do is acknowledge his choice."

"But- But I'm the- the titan!"

Mikasa takes a deep breath. "Now I know why he told me. He wanted me to keep an eye on you just because of this."

"Because of what?"

"He thinks you're needed. He wants me to keep you safe. And away from the MP."

"What?"

"Armin has proven himself time and time again so he's trustworthy!" Mikasa says. "So I trust whatever plan he has. I'm keeping you away from the MPs even if it means knocking sense into your mind. So stay put."

Eren clicks his tongue. "What do you even want from this!" he growls. "I don't need babysitting!"

Mikasa clicks her tongue. "What I want-- is to wake up one day and not live in the fear that my loved ones can be taken away from me. But I know that's a lot." she whispers. "So I just want to go home. I want to give my home back to my mother. This place, this hell, is a *disgusting* place to live in. And I'm sure Armin has a plan for that too."

"Exactly what I've seen saying and *someone* kept telling me to stay competent like cattle!" Eren snaps.

"Well, I was wrong!" Mikasa admits. "When I thought you two were dead and I got back to Carla. I realized you were right. If we don't have suitable plans to engage in an attack on titans, we'll be doomed to be eaten one day. And guess what--" Mikasa narrows her eyes. "My mother is behind the first and *only* line of defense. Like hell I'm going to make sure the titans don't pass it."

Eren rolls his eyes. "If you're done with your speech--" he clears his throat.

Mikasa brings her eyes back to the food and starts eating again. The bread tastes strangely sweet in her mouth, Eren takes a bite from his own loaf unwillingly.

Eren is almost done with his food when he mumbles: "I'm gonna go check on Armin this afternoon."

"No you're not."

Carla's strict voice makes Eren freeze. He slowly turns his head around to see Carla, her face turned red from anger. "I need to talk to you two," she says.

Mikasa and Eren exchange a look. Eren swallows down the stew and forces a smile. "Uhm, what's wrong?" he asks, acting oblivious.

Carla clears her throat. "I'll ask this bluntly. I- We've known Armin for a long long time but... I have to ask you two to stay away from him," she says.

Eren freezes for a second.

His fingers wrap tightly around his spoon, tight enough to make his knuckles turn white. He takes a sharp breath through his teeth, Carla notices his discomfort immediately.

Carla puts her hand over her sons, Eren's fingers let go of their tight tense immediately. Carla smiles softly but Eren presses his mouth to a thin line. "Eren, you know I just want what's best for you, alright?"

"Armin won't-- Armin isn't a danger!"

Carla sighs. "I'm sorry but he is. He always was. Don't think I don't know he was the one who nailed the idea of freedom in your head."

"But Mom--"

"And the scouts? The forbidden book? Trost??" Carla repeats, reciting the long list of mischiefs Eren and Armin, along with Mikasa sometimes, had been caught together. "For once in your life, please don't get close to him. Not at least while his deal with the titan is proven wrong or right."

Mikasa's eyes widened. She opens her mouth to say something but Eren beats her to it.

Armin said not to speak a word.

He said not to let anyone know Eren had the titan.

That includes their mother.

But Eren-- Eren wants to, no *needs* to, hear more about his mothers opinion on this titan even if he can't ask it directly. "Mom... Do you..." he swallows hard. "Do you think that titan is... Trying to manipulate humans or eats humans?"

Carla blinks in surprise. "Oh Maria. Why are you asking this suddenly, Eren?" she asks, eyes narrowed dangerously.

Eren rubs the back of his neck and efficiently dodges Mikasa's stare. "A-I'm Just curious. Every-Everyone's talking about it, you know. About this new monster."

Carla takes a deep breath. "I'm no titan expert. But from what I heard from Keith all those times ago I... I think it might just be another titan they call an 'abnormal'. That's why- why I want you away from this mess, Eren."

Carla takes his face into her hands. "I don't want a special person as a son, I just want a living one." She reminds him. "I don't know what you're thinking, Eren. But remember that, ok?"

Eren puts a hand over hers and slowly closes her eyes.

I'm sorry, Mom...

I'm so sorry..

After so many years of living in fight or flight situations, Armin has found himself unable to sleep when he's around new company.

And although he knows Captain Levi and Commander Erwin better than he knows himself, the moment he hears their footsteps in his lonely cell, his eyes immediately wake up and he sits up on his bed.

The chains around his hands make a loud rattling sound as he sits up. Commander Erwin and Captain have just walked into the room.

Levi chuckles. "Well well well, the brat is awake," he says. "It must be our lucky day."

Commander Erwin takes one of the chairs and sits on them. He watches Armin's face with a serious look on his eyes. "Do you know who we are?"

Armin swallows hard. "Yes..." he nods. "You're commander Erwin and-and captain Levi. Of the survey corps."

Erwin nods slowly. "That's right. And you are..."

"Armin Arlert, sir. Nice to meet you." he says, unable to fight the anxiety in his body. "Are-Are you here to ask me about the titan?"

Levi clicks his tongue. "Sharp, aren't we?"

Erwin ignores it. "We are." he admits. "There is going to be a trial for you, Armin. Premier Zachary will decide your fate as what you did was more or less a treason."

Armin hangs his head low. "I know."

"But I believe in your testimony. You look like a smart, logic-driven person." he leans down and rests his elbows on his knees. "Maybe we should start by asking: why did you trust a titan in the first place?" Commander Erwin asks.

That's the moment.

Armin's crack a maniacal smile. It dissolves quickly and thankfully neither sees it on his face in the dark of his cell. "My... My parents were killed by the military police..." he mumbles, staring at his own white covers.

That shocks both Erwin and Levi into silence.

Armin slowly raises his head. The hurt in his eyes isn't acting at all. It's the genuine feelings that Armin allows to be ripped from his heart. His blue eyes narrow at Erwin Smith.

"So I thought..." he murmurs. "If humans can kill humans just to find the truth... Maybe titans aren't the enemy at all."

Gears turn behind Erwin's blue eyes.

"When I saw that titan carrying that stone... I realized maybe that titan isn't the enemy. I don't care who's under that disguise. I just cared about that hole." he says as a matter of fact. "And I was right." Armin adds with a smirk.

"You say that with such confidence." Levi says, eyes narrowed.

Armin shrugs. "Sir, who am I to judge the grand scheme of things? But I think just that Trost has protective walls around it again is enough for me." he murmurs.

"You have helped a man eating a monster evade death." Levi says, venom dripping from his voice. "You should drop that shit eating grin from your face and face the facts."

Oh, I see Captain Levi is still all the same .

Armin's body freezes at the thought. Because out of everyone, Levi's death was the only one he didn't witness in that other timeline. He doesn't know what happened to him. He likes to think he somehow survived.

He is humanity's strongest soldier after all.

But then.

You have helped a man eating a monster evade death .

Armin grinds his teeth angrily. His threads of patience snap. "I don't know who that titan is, but I still support them!" Armin declares loudly.

"Since the moment they appeared with that yellow lightning I didn't see it attack a single human!"

Erwin hums thoughtfully. "Lightning bolt?"

"Yes!" Armin says. "A yellow lightning bolt. The titan also disappeared with steam."

"Stop lying." Levi hisses. "We have eye witnesses that the titan literally chewed you out."

Armin hums. "And that's enough. Because I was *in his stomach* and other than me and my friend, no one else was there."

Levi clicks his tongue. "You sound so happy that you were eaten, brat."

Armin lowers his head. "I'm not happy, but I don't regret the circumstances either." he says.

"You speak as if you've seen him before. And the records say you have. In an explosion." Erwin recites. "Want to say anything about it."

Armin arches an eyebrow. "Both were accidents, " he says. "I know nothing about that titan."

Erwin hums. "One time might be an accident, Armin. But two times it isn't."

Armin frowns. Then an idea slips into his mind.

"If you're so hell bent on thinking I can summon it..." Armin lets his head fall. "Let me go on an expedition with the scouts."

Armin tilts his head. "I can't summon that thing but if your hypothesis is right and it's following me around... Then... It should show up." he offers.

Erwin thinks for a moment.

He stands up and walks to the bars. "Your idea does sound good." he says and reaches his hand into the bars. "It sounds good to me."

Stunned, Armin stares at Erwin's hand before he jumps up and shakes it.

Armin swallows hard.

Erwin turns around to leave. "I will take your side in court. You better prepare to defend yourself." is all he says.

He leaves and Levi follows him. Just before they walk out of the dungeon, Armin sticks his head out of the bars. "Can I... Can I have visitation from two of my friends?" Armin says. "They are my world and I'd do anything for their safety."

Erwin looks at him from the corner of his eyes. It looks like he caught up to what He meant to say.

"I'll see what I can do."

"The kid definitely knows the rogue titan." Erwin says, slamming the documents on the table. "And I have a vague guess that he wanted to lead me to understand without the MP finding out."

Miche hums. "Are you sure you're not getting too much into this?" he asks. "I mean-- you barely know the boy."

"Yes. But he was obviously trying to get me to his side. He said often that he doesn't trust the MP because they killed his parents but he needs someone to keep an eye on the titan." Erwin flipped through the documents and pulled Eren and Mikasa's files on the table.

"The rogue titan is either Eren Yeager or Mikasa Ackerman--"

The doors open with a loud bang. Behind them is a clearly distressed Hange. "Please tell me I heard things wrong!" They cry.

They come forth and grab the sides of Erwin's office table. Their hazel eyes glow maddeningly. "Oh myyyyy a random boy got a titan friend sooner than I did??"

"Hange, please!" Moblit stumbles in.

Erwin shakes his head. "Its True, Hange. And we were discussing him. Sit down, we need your opinion." Erwin points at an empty seat in front of him.

Hange sits down with a pout. Moblit stands next to them, an apologetic look on their face. Hange pouts again. "I'm kinda jealous." they murmur. Their hands reach and snatch the papers before Miche could open them. She looks at Eren and Mikasa's description with a curious look in their brown eyes. "He got a titan friend before me... Ah, misery."

They arch an eyebrow. "Ok, which one is the titans friend?"

Erwin gives him Armin's files. Hange narrows their eyes with a growl. "When I find this boy..."

"Shut up, four eyes. It's nothing to be happy about." Levi says. "Unless you want to be in jail in his stead."

Hange hums. "Ah, not bad..." they say dismissively. "Though I think... I think the titan can't be human, you know."

"Just assume it is." Erwin says, lacing his fingers and holding them in front of his face. "Which one do you think can turn into a titan based on your experiments."

Hange hums loudly. They rub their chin and lick their lips before giving Erwin Eren's folder. "If this hypothetical scenario of yours is true. Then it's definitely the boy."

Erwin narrows his eyes. "Eren Yeager?"

"Yup." Hange says, looking up with a wink. "Other than the fact that they share their eye colors... Here it's mentioned that Eren has had a strange motivation in his training. Also he has zero medical history, no broken bones, or broken legs or loss of function ever lasted in his medical history more than a day. That's either biggest luck or titan regeneration powers. Also it's said that he has no detectable heartbeat, which is strange but--." Hange shrugs. "Meh, the important thing is that Mikasa was with the refugees while Eren was MIA. So It's definitely the boy."

"We don't have solid proof." Erwin points out.

Hange arches an eyebrow. "We don't have solid proof about a lot of things."

Erwin sighs. "You're right. We need to get to the titan first, then we can discuss his identity." he says as a matter of fact.

Erwin slides the trios folders aside.

Something tells him this tree is the key to most of the mysteries the survey corps face.

If only...

If only...

The next day, Armin is greeted by a surprise that makes him jump a few feet into the air.

One moment, he's alone.

The next, Hange appears with a bang. They bang the bars and look at Armin with maniacal eyes. Armin doesn't recognise them for a solid second, thinking death has come to finally take him.

Until, their eyes soften and Armin's broken memories piece themselves together.

Hange smiles and tilts their head. "Hello, Armin!" Hange says, a smile on their face that...

A smile that Armin has missed in the past couple of years.

Armin's eyes soften. "Commander Hange..." Armin mumbles and then wants to slap himself because not yet--

Hange laughs. "It's section commander, Dear! And oh, even Erwin bits the dust there is Miche before me, I bet he won't be too happy if he heard you say that! Aren't you, Miche!"

Armin hasn't realized Miche in the room before them. He was quiet, thinking, staring. Miche hums, not giving an actual answer formed in words.

Armin looks at him, thinking about all this time...

They never knew what happened to Miche. They didn't even find his bones. It was all until Armin explained that when Zeke and Eren touched, Eren saw how many scouts Zeke had killed and how. Miche was among them. Though, Eren didn't bother to explain it back in the paths.

And Hange...

"Levi is your subordinate now! Make sure to boss him around!"

Those fateful last words, right after an unbelievable responsibility was thrown right over Armin's shoulders. Armin sometimes thinks maybe that's how Hange felt, when Erwin died and left all that weight over Hanges shoulder.

"Oi, oi, little boy..." Reality washes over Armin's face like cold ice when he hears Hange's voice. "You have a trial to go to! We're here to take you!"

That's right.

The doors open and Armin walks out of it without much resistance. They cuff his hands behind his back and walk him to the trial room.

The light hurts his eyes, Armin squints his eyes when they get out of that dungeon. And that's when Miche takes a long sniff from Armin. Armin stays still, knowing Miche's signature sense of smell.

He nods.

Hange beams. "You're a good one!" they say. They reach the door of the courtroom and Hange takes both his shoulders. "Don't die there." they say, an aura of threat in their voice. "You know- you should tell me all about how you got a titan friend!"

"I uh--"

"See you later!" Hange throws him inside the courtroom and into the arms of an MP. The man clicks his tongue angrily and leads him to the middle of the trial. He leads him from the angry looks of the people and the church priests.

He is forced to his knees in front of a man he knows too well, Premier Zachary. Last time he saw the man, he was blown to bits by the Yeagerists.

Armin can never wipe the threat from the back of his mind. That famous torture chair of his was right next to them all the time Mikasa and Armin tried to talk him into giving them a visitation.

Armin takes a deep breath.

Zachary closes his folder and hums. "We're here to discuss what to do with you, Private Arlert. You have done treason against humanity

for working with a titan. We have two sides..."

He sighs.

Armin understands, this man wants to be anywhere but here.

Zachary points to the right. "The military police who wants to torture you for information." he says. "And the scouts, who want to use your abilities in the field. I want to hear what you have to say."

An MP stands up, slamming his hands to the tables. "We should kill him right now!" he yells. "He has communicated with a titan twice! It ended in a cadets death once! Berthold Hoover! That's his name."

Armin takes a sharp breath.

Berthold.

That's a car he never thought would be used against him.

He summons every ounce of power he has. "I know nothing about Bertholds death!" he says.

"Lies!"

"I'm not lying!" Armin says again. "And me helping that titan has nothing to do with him."

Zachary leans his head against his fist. "Tell us what it depends on, then?" he says. "And mind your words. Carefully. If I catch a lie your death certificate is signed."

Armin narrows his eyes, there is barely anything he can do when he's bound like this. Alone and surrounded.

Armin takes a deep breath again, he knows Zachary's threat is not an empty one. It's as serious as that chair that day in his office.

Armin shakes his head. "My squad, squad 19, was killed. And I was moments away from death myself but that titan appeared in a yellow lightning." he explains. "My leg was broken and I could barely hold my squad mate Eren Yeager. The titan approached us and swallowed him first. I fought but it ended up in his jaws."

Armin shakes his head. "I got eaten. I do. But when I open my eyes next time, Eren and I are on the walls." he says, meeting Zachary right in his eyes. "And he was carrying a boulder on his shoulder. I found out what he wanted to do. It was strange but I... But I realized he didn't hurt so he might be different. So I stepped in. I was right."

Zachary looks at the report. "Well, from the looks of it, your story aligns with the ones of eyewitnesses, Eren Yeager, and the little evidence we found," he says. "At least. We can assume you're not lying."

"Why? He can be."

"He can be, but I believe his lies are convincing enough to give him a chance."

Armin snaps his head towards Commander Erwin. He looks over to the premier with a hum. "I believe the better question should be, why not test this ability. Our only option is to see if his lies can harm us or not."

An MP makes a loud and dismissive snarl. "His titan can come at our throats at any second. He's befriended a sick monster--"

The words make something bubble and boil in Armin's chest. He can't keep it in his chest anymore. "I helped the wall get closed off again and if time went back, I'd do it again!" Armin shouts at the MP officer. "Unlike you, I have a family right behind the wall rose. I know what it's like to be in a titans jaw and I don't want that on anyone. And the person who saved Trost and stopped many from ending in titans mouths is no monster!"

Armin narrows his eyes.

"And if I have to cooperate with a titan to repel other titans, I will do that!!" he shouts. "Because the strategy of hiding behind walls is failing! Why can't you see this!!"

Zachary hums. "So you mean you're willing to trust this boy and his titan?"

Erwin nods. "We can take him to the next expedition and the results of that would be what evidence you need to trial him properly."

Zachary rubs his beard.

"As sharp as ever, commander Erwin." Zachary says. He scribbles something on a piece of paper and picks up his gavel. He hits the table with it and announces his verdict. "Armin Arlerts custody will be given to the scouts. His performance in the next expedition will determine his fate in the next trial."

And just like that, Armin exhales loudly like he had been drowning.

When Eren imagined this moment many times again in his childhood, the atmosphere was much more hopeful, brighter, happier. It was filled with raw emotions, of will power, of his friends laughing that finally! They have reached the survey corps.

Such childish dreams they were.

Eren understands his own foolishness now.

Mikasa is right next to him but he feels more alone than he has ever felt. Comrades that he never even knew their names have died and friends he trained with are no longer here.

And those who are...

Annie said she doesn't even want to think about the survey corps. She said it was pointless to even attend this ceremony.

Even Sasha and Connie, the resident laughing duo of the 104 are just standing next to a wall silently. Both of them were too burnt out to even mention anything. And when Eren follows their sight, it ends up on Jean and Marco. Jean and Marco, who always seemed to be in sync, are now arguing.

Eren can't hear what they're talking about. He can see Marco's sad face and Jean's forced neutral one. If this was a soap opera, Eren would describe it as a breakup.

Not when both are close to losing their tempers.

Eren is walking before he knows it.

Mikasa's hands reach to stop him but he's faster. He walks over to Sasha and Connie and asks without hesitation: "what's wrong? Why are those two here?"

Connie hugs himself. "Ah, I guess you guys were with Armin so you didn't hear it..."

Eren arches an eyebrow. "Hear what? Shouldn't those two be ready to move to the interior?" he pauses. "Shouldn't you guys...?"

Sasha takes a deep breath. "Jean wants to join the survey corps." she says simply.

Eren has to physically restrain himself from gasping. Mikasa stops next to him with a shocked expression of her own. But she doesn't comment.

Connie tilts his head and watches Jean and Marco's silent argument again. "I think his parents injury really hit Jean pretty hard." Connie murmurs.

Sasha can only nod.

Eren looks back. Their argument seems to have dulled down because slowly, Marco lifts his hand.

Jean runs his hand through his hair and shakes it. There is a bitter smile on Marco's face and Jean looks in despair. He says something and both move towards them.

Jean puts his hands on his hips with a sigh when he sees Eren next to Sasha and Connie. "I was hoping I wouldn't run into you of all people." he hums.

Eren doesn't have the drive in him to argue or bicker with Jean. He doesn't want to start a fight.

He doesn't want to.

His face remains neutral. "I guess we'll be seeing each other a lot now that we share a regiment." is all he says.

He looks at Sasha and Connie, then back at Jean. "Are you sure?" he asks, too quietly.

"It's a choice I've made." Jean says, confidently. "And I keep telling them it is a choice they should make on their own. Because when we all inevitably die, we have only ourselves to blame."

Marco presses his mouth to a thin line. "Don't start talking like that now, please!"

Jean doesn't pay it much mind.

Before any of them can say anything else, a ring of a bell calls them to the altar where commander Erwin is going to do his speech.

Eren wonders what sort of speech is going to make their traumatized generation see reason.

But otherwise, Eren can't think of why anyone without monster blood in his veins, or any better choice, would want to come to this

regiment.

Eren and Mikasa stand in the front row. Mikasa peeks a look at him every few minutes to make sure he's still standing, or maybe he's too pale and doesn't know it.

Commander Erwin climbs up to the altar and looks at the crowd. "Good evening. My name is Erwin Smith, commander of the survey corps, better known as the scout regiment." he says. Commander Erwin crosses his hands behind his back. He keeps his chin high and the ground yields to every step he takes with a loud sound.

what a commander... Eren thinks, just what he assumed the commander of the scouts would be.

nothing like that Shadis!

Erwin looks down at the crowd. "Ever since the fall of wall Maria, the scouting legion is well known to have grown in loss and gain. Our main objective has been trying to seal the hole in wall maria and take back our territories from the titans. And we've lost 30% of our forces along the way. Now with the gate of Trost gone, all our efforts have gone. But this is a task that must be done. As we saw in the latest attack, our piece is bound to a threat and titans won't turn merciful any time soon."

The last line makes Eren's heart skip a beat.

"The scouts have always been the spears of humanity. This means we face the worst of this cruel world. And the most mysteries. All for our survival. This new mystery includes the titan that covered the hole in Trost."

Two soldiers appear behind Erwin. Their height difference makes it so that the map stands uneven.

"We'll have to restart our efforts from Krolva. Just west of here." he says. "And of course, we'll need every soldier we can get. However, I

estimate that almost one third of you won't come back home."

Eren takes a deep breath.

"Have this mind as you choose, the armored, colossal and the rogue titans are mysteries that get closer with each breath we take." Erwin says. "Now those who wish to join the scouts may stay. Others may leave."

For a second, Eren can hear the sound of his own breathing.

His choice has always been simple. He had always wanted to be a scout. He doesn't know when he turned to this monster that is capable of harming the person he cared about the most, but he dreamed of this since he was seven.

The human part of him deserves this moment of joy.

Behind him, Sasha and Connie fight with every nerve of their instincts while Jean stands painfully still, dark bags linger under his eyes.

Marco smiles at Jean, softly. "Well, I guess." Marco touches the back of his head awkwardly. "I can still invite you for drinks in the interior from time to time..."

Jean smiles bitterly. "You bet."

Marco puts a hand on his shoulder. "I'll see you." he says like a promise, an unbroken vow.

Jean doesn't return it, he just nods.

Marco turns around and walks away from the altar.

And just Marco.

Between the sea of people who leave, Eren turns around and sees Reiner, Jean, Sasha, Connie, Krista and Ymir still standing.

Erwin clears his throat, it gets all of their attention. "You have all faced your fears tonight and made a choice that was no doubt difficult." he says. "This is an honest salute-- dedicate your hearts!"

Eren hits his fist against his heart.

Mikasa does the same.

So does everybody else.

For a moment, Eren's dreams come back to him.

In every version of that dream, Armin was right next to him. He would smile awkwardly and start thinking all about how he could survive outside the walls. He would talk all about the breeds of titans he has read about.

And Eren would smile and listen to every word.

Reality washes over him like a tidal wave when he sees Mikasa, and Just Mikasa turns to him and tells him to leave now.

Armin is in a cell.

He is in that dark, damp cell because he decided to protect that monster of a friend.

Armin knows what he's doing.

He repeats it in his mind like a broken mantra. He doesn't let doubt in his heart because he knows Armin is one of the most brilliant people that ever exist. He saved Eren's mother when no one could. He talked Eren out of trouble when adults couldn't. He saved Trost when everyone was hopeless.

Armin knows what he's doing.

Eren suddenly understands the blind trust he has for Armin is borderline terrifying.

Well, how was that?

As promised, some angst on Erens part in coming up + Armin finally has to make a choice.

my twitter is: @[Rose_lily_sun](#)

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happily.

The devil you hate

Chapter 8: The devil you hate

Armin starts thinking maybe he can save more than a few people.

The 57th expedition beyond the walls is a go and Armin is faced with the facts once again.

Helllloooo

Sorry for being late! I have no excuse other than the weather is 35+ degrees and even typing makes me sweat.

But somehow, it's not warm enough to turn on the air conditioner according to my dad!

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

Character deaths. Violence. Injury, alot of blood. Poisoning people. Armin being manipulative. Poisoning people.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The castle is... Superb.

Armin can look at it for days, and wonder why didn't him and Mikasa ever rode from the headquarters to the castle when Eren stayed with Levi's squad.

Well, he is in Eren's stead now, and for some reason, Commander Erwin is keeping him under special supervision. He stands in front of the castle and stares at it, he can see Levi squad moving in the rooms and cleaning the otherwise dusted and ancient palace.

Eld, Petra, Gunther and Oluo. Those are their names. Those are the names Eren cried himself to sleep over hundreds of times in the other timeline. Armin never got to meet them in person but he knows...

He knows Annie killed them in the last timeline.

Seeing them as living people rather than the corpses Armin had to throw off track, makes a twisted feeling grow in his gut.

He will stop Annie from making this mistake! Maybe that way a genocide isn't what finally reunites the two sides and forces them to forgive each other.

Armin feels a hit on the back of his head and then the hood that is violently shoved on his head.

"Oi, keep your hood on, brat."

Armin holds on to the hood and pulls it down to cover his eyes. "Ok, Captain Levi." there is no mistaking that voice. The demanding tone that slowly washed away as he grew to know them better, at least in the other timeline.

Levi steps closer. He hums and looks at the folder again. "Here it is said your eyes are blue." he says, eyeing Armin from the corner of his eyes.

Armin pulls the hood more down. "It is, sir."

"They are purple." Levi says as a matter of fact.

"No, No, sir, they're blue." Armin stutters.

Suddenly, a woosh sound echoes when Levi takes out his blade and holds it up in front of Armin. The blond's heart skips a violent beat.

"Look up." Levi orders and Armin does that, he realizes the blade is held from his wider side, so that Armin can see half of his face's reflection on the blade.

And it's true, his eyes that used to be a gentle ocean blue, now have a violet hue to them.

Armin's eyes widen, he touches under his eyes and blinks rapidly. He massages his eyes and they are still purple in the reflection.

what??

Levi pushes his blade back into his ODM and clicks his tongue. "Well, see what I mean now? You need to update your files."

Levi looks at the castle. "you guys will stay with my squad. So if the titan actually shows up, we are the only scouts who can handle him." Levi says.

"I'm. I'm honored, Captain Levi." Armin says with a nod. "But wait... Is that plural?"

A distant sound of a carriage fills the forest and Armin looks back. Just in time to see two horses running their way. He recognises them in an instant. They are Eren and Mikasa with Petra riding right behind them.

Eren's eyes sparkle when he sees Armin.

"Armin!" Eren shouts with joy, he jumps from his horse and runs the remaining distance to the other.

Armin can't believe his eyes until he's being tackled by the other. His arms protectively wrapped around his shoulders and pulled him in. "You're ok!!"

Mikasa stays on her horse, a smirk on her lips. "Of course he is..." she whispers quietly enough that no one can hear.

Petra smiles and pulls her horse back. She takes Eren's horse's saddle and nods. "Well, someone was eager to come here." she says loudly.

Eren pulls back just to smile at Armin. "Can you believe it!! Commander Erwin allows us to stay with you and Levi squad!"

Armin blinks in surprise. "Co-commander Erwin?" he asks.

Eren nods happily.

Does he know??

He probably does, he's commander Erwin after all!

Armin shuts his eyes and tries not to let Eren see the fears in his eyes.

ok, Erwin knows. Then what will he try to do with this information if he hasn't confronted us already??

"Oi, you three. Enough sulking, we need any extra pair of hands we can get while cleaning." Levi orders. "Follow me in."

Mikasa jumps from her horse and so does Petra. She assures her that she'll take the horses to the stables and Mikasa should follow her friends. Mikasa nods.

Not surprisingly, Levi takes them to the dungeons and to a cell that is transformed into a room. "This is your room." he says, opening the bars and showing inside. Inside are three beds, a separate bathroom and shower and a table. "You three will stay here regardless of the fact that you're boys and girls." Levi says. "But if I catch either of you--"

Armin immediately raises his hands. "THANKS! Thank you for giving us our room." he interrupts before Levi can finish.

Eren and Mikasa exchange a look.

Levi clicks his tongue. He spins the key in his hands and turns around to leave. "Hurry! We should start cleaning. Also--" he yells the last part. "If you want to leave castle grounds, me or a member of my squad must come with you! Dismissed."

All three of them hit their fists against their heart in a formal salute. Levi clicks his tongue almost angrily, Armin can hear him say something followed by *Erwin*, but he doesn't comment on it.

The three of them wait until Levi is gone, until not even the sound of his footsteps can reach their ears.

Mikasa is the first one who breaks from the persona of a dedicated soldier. "Wow, look at this..." she smiles. "Remember the time I told you two you'll end up in prison because of that book."

Eren huffs. "So? What's your point?"

Armin's shoulders fall, he allows himself to take a deep breath. Something about Eren and Mikasa bickering like children calms his nerves enough that his senses start to clear. His nose picks up on the faint smell of cleaners around the room and his eyes realize how dark it really is.

Armin walks up to one of the torches and picks it up. He uses it to light the other torches, humming to himself. "Eren... Mikasa..." he murmurs.

The two stop and turn to Armin. Armin holds the torch in between his fingers, tightly. He slowly raises his head and meets Mikasa's eyes, then Eren's. "Let's make a promise." he says. "In the scouts... We won't trust anyone other than the three of us."

Eren blinks in surprise. "What... What do you mean, Armin?"

"I mean that quite literally." he adds with a sigh. "Trust in your own power more than you trust anyone in the scout regiment, other than me and Mikasa."

Eren clicks his tongue. "I feel like you're making fun of the Levi squad!" he whispers. "Have you seen these people?? The physically weakest of them-- who is Gunther by the way-- has 26 titan kills!"

Mikasa narrows her eyes. "Armin is right."

"Mikasa!!"

"26 titan kills means they can easily make you number 27!" She whisper-yells.

"See? Other than that--" Armin narrows his eyes. "You- just imagine if there is a life or death situation--"

Armin hits Eren's forehead with his free index finger. "Think, Eren, think!" he says. "If there is a life or death situation with your titan- do you want your titan protected by Levi Squad or not?!"

Eren pulled his head back and rubbed his forehead. "I- but when you put it this way-- I."

Eren takes a deep breath and then sighs through his nose.

He looks up and tilts his head. A smile is on his lips. Eren's smile looks innocent. Nothing like the man who killed the world at all.

Armin almost falls for the simplicity of it.

"It's ok." he says with a childish grin that reaches up unto his eyes. "I have faith in your judgment!"

Eren turns around to the stairs. "But I think we should go up now! We need to change and help them clean this place..."

Armin has to agree.

If there is one thing Armin remembers clearly as crystal about Levi, is that a peck of dust angers him more than a titan.

That night, Eren wakes up with cold sweat.

He has to cover his mouth and bite on his hand to stop himself from screaming when he wakes up. His eyes are bloodshot red.

"That was a nightmare... Just... Just a nightmare..." Eren grabs the sides of his head. "A nightmare, you won't eat anyone! You won't eat anyone! You-- just a--"

Armin's soft snoring lulls him into silence.

Eren's fingers bury themselves into the sides of his head.

He turns around and stares at Armin as he sleeps. His chest rises and falls and with each rhythm, Eren's heart calms down a heartbeat more.

He's here, He's safe.

Eren looks above and catches a glimpse of Mikasa sleeping in her own bed, just her hair out of the blankets.

Eren takes a deep breath and falls back on his own bed.

they're ok, you're human. It was just a nightmare.

Eren looks at his own hands. They're small, they can only hold his friends hands, not their entire bodies. They're safe from him.

(He still remembers himself in his titan form. The world was too dull and too numb, he couldn't feel the dance of wind on his naked skin or the gentle touch of Armin as he tried to get his attention. He couldn't feel the crushing weight of the boulder he carried, just that

he had to carry it. He couldn't sense the plants he crushed under his feet, nor the little titans that got caught under his toes.)

No... It was real...

Eren shuts his eyes.

It was real and you ate him and it might just be a stroke of freaking luck that he's still alive!

Eren's feet take him away before he can stop himself. He's standing and leaving, sneaking away as silently as he could. He's thankful he doesn't come across any of Levi's squad as he walks out. He just sees Eld guarding the front door, so he sneaks out from the window.

He needs fresh air. He doesn't care if Captain Levi kills him afterwards.

He walks out of the castle, he takes one step after another until he's standing next to a small lake deep in the forest. He's sure if he keeps walking, he'll find his friends in the headquarters not far from here.

The headquarters kept normal soldiers.

Not the castle they kept the monsters.

Eren sits down. His hand wanders to a dagger he had bought from Trost. It's a work of beauty, a fine blade and a blue handle. Eren can see his own reflection in its blade.

titans can regenerate limbs...

so this... Poses no danger to me.

Maybe... Maybe he isn't the monster he thought he was.

If so, that makes him a valuable soldier. Someone that won't be affected by normal injuries. Someone that can be of use to the scout regiment.

That makes Eren smile.

He'll be useful.

He won't be a monster.

He will find a way to kill his own kind. And once he's the last titan...

That makes Eren smile...

"I guess... There is only one way to find out." Eren mumbles as he raises the dagger up and high. His hands shake but he narrows his eyes and grips the dagger tightly.

He brings it down in one motion, the dagger pierces his palm and blood over flows from his wound. Some of it splashes to his face. The pain is a welcome burn, it soothes Eren's mind a little, telling him all about the way--

Eren yanks the dagger out.

And immediately, the wound starts to steam.

Eren watches with awe as the wound stitches itself together like it was nothing. He hums.

So he has some healing powers.

Now... Can I regenerate a limb?

That is a hard question to answer. To test it, He needs something to bite on. He looks around but finds nothing suitable. So he takes a deep breath and grinds his teeth together.

He takes off his boots and puts his right foot on the corner of the lake. He licks his lips. Anticipation makes his heart beat rapidly, he puts the dagger over his pinky toe.

He brings the dagger down in one swift motion.

He screams louder than he anticipates.

His eyes tear up and the dagger falls from his hand and onto the grass. He has made a mess of blood on the lake, thankfully most of it falls into the water.

Eren hisses angrily. He needs to wash it. He cups his hands and takes water from the lake to wash the blood away. He grinds his teeth together angrily. There is no steam rising from his toe. He curses his luck.

And then after washing it once, Eren realizes his foot is no longer bleeding. The bleeding has long stopped.

Eren blinks in surprise. The skin around his feet starts to move and morph into tiny worms like beings that engulf the wound and start to inflate.

Leaves get crushed under the soft weight of a stranger.

Another person.

Eren doesn't have enough time to hide all this blood and his crime scene fast enough.

He just shoves his injured foot into the lake and hopes no one sees it.

"Who's that-- Eren!"

Eren's blood freezes.

That is no stranger.

"Eren! What are you doing!!" she gasps, she points at the wound on Eren's hand with her hand. "Why's your hand-- hand bleeding??"

"What are *you* doing, Krista?" Eren whispers back. "Isn't this your first night here? You should be in your dorm."

"So should you!" she says. She takes Eren's hands and Eren pulls it back, not allowing her to have a look at the steaming mess his hand is. "What are you doing?"

"You-You should wash that wound be-before it gets infected." Krista stutters. She sits down and pulls Eren's hand towards herself. "Ok now I--"

Her jaw falls slack. "I... I could have sworn it was bleeding." she whispers. "And... And there is blood everywhere and..."

She flicks his hand. Eren pulls his fully healed hand back with a painful yelp. He glares at her before he remembers he's the monster here and she was just trying to help.

"I'm... I'm sorry. I was just looking for a place to be alone." Krista sighs loudly. "I shouldn't have interrupted you."

"You're being too kind again." Eren murmurs with disgust. But this time, the emotions are aimed at himself, not Krista's acts. "... I don't deserve it."

Krista blinks in surprise. "Are... Are you ok, Eren?"

"No, I'm fine I'm just..."

You can't tell her.

Armin said to keep this a secret.

you can't just spill it out like that!

Eren swallows hard. He needs to get this weight off his chest and poor Krista is the first person other than Armin or Mikasa he came across. Eren bites his lip. He tries to stop himself but he can't. His mind quickly comes up with lies mixed with truths that spills out of his mouth without his permission.

"I'm a monster. There are probably a lot of deaths that are my fault. A lot of deaths will be my fault." Eren murmurs, his eyes glued to the ground. "A lot of them... Good people. People who would've been much better for humanity than I am. If I'd--If I'd just died instead of them..."

Krista presses her mouth to a thin line. "Eren... Is... Is this about that speech you gave that made many others interested in the scouts?" she asks sincerely.

Eren hasn't heard what she'd asked when he nods.

"It... It doesn't make me mad though. Armin and Mikasa are more important than anyone to me here but... but... But what makes me angry is that--" Eren clicks his tongue. "... Is my mom..."

Krista smiles almost rudely but bitterly. "Eren... Are you serious?"

Eren bends one of his knees, he rests his elbow on it and leans back. "I bet... I bet even if I told my mom she'd be disgusted." Eren whispers quietly. "I wish... I wish a monster like me was never born."

The impact on his face is immediate.

It takes a few seconds for Eren to come back to reality. He blinks in surprise. The right of his face has a red handprint that throbs painfully.

A slap.

He'd been slapped.

Krista Lenz, the goddess of 104th, has just smacked him across the face.

She stood up, angry and her breathing aggravated. She pointed her finger at Eren with an angry growl. "How dare you! How dare you say that about yourself!" she shouts, her voice echoes all over the forest.

She kneels down and takes Eren's shoulders, shaking him violently. "Who is she to determine your worth!?!"

Eren blinks rapidly. He remembers what his father used to say, that humans often reacted based on their own experiences. And by the look of terror and madness in Krista's eyes. He can guess her memories with her own mother weren't very pleasant. However, Eren wasn't going to sit back and let her insult his mother like that. "She's my mom! The most important human in my life! The person who gave me life!" he says, calmly. "Of course her opinion is important to me! I--"

Another hit, this time in his left cheek.

Eren's eyebrows twitch. He stands up again. "I've had it with you, lady--"

"Somebody has to pull you out to reality!" Krista yells. "And I see Armin is doing a poor job in that. But I can't sit back when you sit and mope and say you wish you were never born! Or that it was better if you died."

Krista clicks her tongue. "Let them burn, let them die for all I care. As long as Ymir is safe you're allowed to kill whoever you want--"

As if a click is turned off, Krista suddenly stops.

She looks up at Eren, horrified at what she was about to say. "I'm-- I'm sorry." Krista yells.

She stumbles back while she runs away. No matter how many times Eren shouts, she doesn't come back.

After getting slapped talking to Krista, Eren's mood felt slightly better. He had to remind himself that his mother is nothing like the picture of mother Krista had in her mind. He is smart and kind. And she said it like that last time because she didn't have all the facts.

Or so that's what he convinced himself.

They had an expedition in a month and Eren can't go and meet up with her before that because Armin is under supervision and he can't leave him. However, He's sure Mikasa will.

"Oi, Yeager, please get your head back to work." Eld snaps his fingers in front of him and Eren realizes he's been in a trance. He blinks away the daydreams and helps Petra load the packages into the wagons. "Did we really need to come all the way to Stohess?" Eren yells at Eld.

Petra throws a broken ODM handle at him. "Be grateful you kids get some time out!" She warns. "If it was to captain Levi, you guys would have been locked in that dungeon every second of the day."

Eld gives Mikasa a too big box, and she carries it to the other carriage.

Armin looks at Eren and Mikasa's work. He was given small boxes filled to the brim from ODM gear handles and other strange circular gears. Eld and Petra were sent to get their requirements, Armin offered to help and Mikasa and Eren tagged along, too happy that they had the chance to take a breather from being supervised nonstop.

Stohess is a beautiful city.

Armin never had the chance to see it before the battle of the female titan, which left half of the city in ruin. Now however, Armin can sit back and enjoy the lazy luxury of the city. It would be a pleasure to live here, safe from titan fights and fear of being eaten alive.

Armin takes a deep breath.

Eld hits his back to get his attention. "Hey, Arlert." he says. "Petra and I have to do some paperwork. We'll be leaving you guys but if we came back and any of you three were gone..." he trails off.

"Oh, Oh, I understand sir." Armin nods. Eld hits his back again in warning and goes inside the building with Petra, leaving the carriage in the trio's care.

Mikasa clicks her tongue in their direction. "So much for training." she growls.

Eren sits down on the wagon. "It's better to sit around and clean in the castle," he points out.

"So You enjoy spending time with Captain Levi. What did you call him??" Mikasa taps her chin. "Ah! The legend of the survey corps??"

Eren grinds his teeth. "Since when are you so talkative?" he shoots back. "What happened to that secret and r--" Armin puts a hand on Eren's shoulders. He immediately stops his banter.

"I'm just glad we got to catch some fresh air." Armin whispers. "Although... I'd prefer it if there weren't so many MPs around."

Mikasa narrows her eyes. "Don't worry. None of them have the courage to actually do something." she admits.

But she is wrong. Because a few minutes later, two people in military police uniform are walking towards them. Armin focuses his attention on them, one is a blond woman and the other is a tall, blackhaired man.

why can't I see them clearly? Do I finally need glasses?

Well, I guess I have to put money away for that.

And then, when they get closer and the man starts to wave, Armin's mind finally cracks and he realizes who they are. "Annie!" Armin calls, waving his hand. It immediately gets her attention. Her partner turns to the voice and Armin's blood freezes in his blood.

Marco waves slowly, his tired face beaming into a smile. "Armin, Eren, Mikasa! Wasn't expecting to run into you of all people." he smiles.

Eren starts chatting but Armin can't hear him. He's too busy staring at Marco and his uniform. The uniform he never got to wear the last time.

The only thought on Armin's mind is that the military brigade sign on his shoulder and the uniform looks absolutely gorgeous and *right* on him.

Marco's smile falls for a moment. "Armin, is- is everything alright?" he asks out of concern.

Armin shakes his head violently. "Yes! Yes! Everything is perfect."

Marco smiles bitterly. "Not that I'm not happy but what are you guys doing here?"

"What? You'll arrest us without a warrant?" Eren laughs. "We're here to get some resources ready for the next expedition."

Annie hums. "And when is that?"

"Next month or so."

Silence settles between them. Marco looks at each of them for a moment before he asks: "so How's Jean?"

Eren shrugs. "Haven't seen horseface in a while but I've heard he's ok." Eren hums.

Marco hums quietly and puts his hands on his hips. "Somehow going to drink doesn't feel as joyful as I thought it would." he admits with a grievous tone. "But anyway, since this is a rare opportunity, do you want a drink? There is a nice bar nearby!"

Eren shakes his head. "Sorry, Marco. But we're under supervision. We can't all leave together--"

"I can!" Armin interrupts him with a big grin. "I can come back before Eld and Petra!"

Mikasa narrows her eyes. "But Armin--"

"I'll be back!" he assures them. There is no way in the world he's missing this once in a lifetime opportunity, no one understands him. Marco is here. Marco is alive. He's inviting them to a drink and there is no way Armin is declining this.

"Are you sure? I mean we can go another time." Marco offers.

Armin shakes his head. "No, I'm fine. Let's go."

Marco beams. "Ok! Now let's go before your superiors come back."

Annie's face hasn't changed but she can see it in her eyes that she isn't exactly neutral to having Armin around. Armin waves at Mikasa and Eren one last time. Then follows Marco to the end of the streets.

"You will love this! Or I hope so." Marco laughs. They walk a few streets towards the north and soon, Armin finds himself standing in front of stairs leading to an underground bar.

It's dark as far as Armin can see with a few torches and the smell of beer too consuming. He wonders if Marco found it while looking for a dead corpse or a runaway thief because there is no way--

"I know it looks shady- but come on!" Marco runs down. Annie follows him with quiet and cautious steps and her hands buried deep in her pocket.

Armin follows them without much of a thought. The inside looks much better than the outside. Marco chats with the bartender like they are good old friends. He turns to Annie and Armin with a grin. The bartender fills three glasses filled with beer and puts them on

their table. "Here Armin, it's on me!" Marco says, shoving a beer to Armin's hands. "You gotta taste this! Even Annie likes it!"

Armin blinks in surprise, Annie and beer? He looks back in shock and sees Annie with her own glass half empty. She clears her throat and nods. "It's tasty." is all she says.

That makes Armin second guess his thoughts. He takes a sip, just as Marco starts the story of how he found this place. Armin's initial guess was right. Marco and Annie are partnered up in most of their cases and one of them was when they found a dead body in the front of this bar

Marco takes a deep breath and slams his beer to the table. "And You won't believe it!" he laughs. "The killer was the victim's sister!"

Armin acts shocked. "The sister??"

Marco nods, he takes a look at his empty beer and sighs. "I'm gonna get a refill! The rest of the story is pretty intense." he says and stands up.

He walks up to the bartender. When He is far enough, Armin turns to Annie. "Does he always talk that much?" Armin laughs, leaning back at the counter. "I bet the suspects don't like it."

Annie stops a laugh before it can bubble out of her lips. "No." she says. "He can control his emotions around others. By the way-- he approached you guys because he thought Jean would be with you too."

Armin hums, licking his lips. "Thought so..." he takes a long sip of his beer. "It's not easy... Being away from friends."

better than the alternative of being dead. He thinks nonchalantly.

"I agreed to come here because this might as well be the last time we see each other and you're alive." Annie points out. "And since

you're the kind of person to just die as you're told, I think I should just say my farewells." she sighs loudly. "Sorry Armin, I'm the bad guy who probably won't remember you after my mission is finished."

Armin might have believed her words if he hadn't seen her actions.

Or now, how her knuckles have turned white because of her angry grip at her beer. Her face is emotionless but her eyes are too focused on the foam and her other hand played with the hem of her hoodie.

"It's ok, I don't really believe that'd make you a bad person anyway." Armin whispers.

"You don't have much time." Annie repeats.

"Well, I have now, so?" Armin holds his beer up, "cheers?"

Annie hits her glass to Armin. "Cheers," she says with the ghost of a smile on her lips.

Not everyone was having fun with Armin gone however, Petra and Eld had yet to return from the storage rooms but Eren is already bored out of his mind, and having nothing better to do than stare at the place Armin disappeared to.

Mikasa sits next to him. The sun is slowly setting down on the walls, local businesses shut down with the sun and nightclubs start to fill.

Eren stares ahead.

He feels Mikasa's heavy hand on back and then--

"You should tell him you're uncomfortable with Annie around."

Eren takes a deep breath and leans his head against his fist. "I have no reason to be uncomfortable." he chuckles. He leans back on the

carriage and looks at his own hands. "And he has every reason to be angry at me."

Mikasa narrows his eyes.

"I have... I have no right to tell Armin what to do or what not to do." Eren murmurs. He runs a hand through his hair. "I'm a monster and he's protecting me. Anyone in his place would just give me away to the MPs."

"Eren--"

"Although..." Eren's jade green eyes glow maddeningly. "Uh-- forget it."

Eren leans back, he puts his elbows on his knees and stares at the horizon. "I'm ok, Mikasa. Believe me." he whispers.

"Sorry, but I don't believe you. What's wrong? Is it about my mother?"

Eren's body tenses. He sighs and nods.

Mikasa sits down next to him. "Let me guess. You're afraid she won't take the news of you being able to turn into a titan kindly." she says.

Eren shuts his eyes and nods.

"Eren, this is mother we are talking about. There is no way in the world she'll be afraid of you or hate you." Mikasa reminds him. "But she will be disappointed if she doesn't hear it from your own mouth."

"It's not like I can't drop a bomb like that." Eren whispers. "And what-if-- what-if--"

Eren sighs loudly. "Forget it."

"Nothing will change by saying 'forget it', you know?"

Eren doesn't say anything.

He doesn't say anything and keeps staring at the skies until they see a very familiar shadow in the distance. Eren is on his feet in a second. "Finally! Armin! Eld and Petra--"

Armin holds his hands up in defeat as he comes closer. "I know, I know, it's my fault." he whispers, his words are sluggish and blur together. Eren narrows his eyes at the blush and red tint over his pale face.

"Armin... Where were you?" It's Mikasa who asks this question.

Armin rubs the side of his face and hums nonchalantly. "Hmm, I don't know." he mumbles. "I'm surprised I found my way back. Are Petra and Eld finished?"

"No, but you shouldn't let them catch you like this." Mikasa helps him into the carriage. Eren holds his hand and helps him sit steady next to the boxes.

Armin falls on his chest, he mumbles something that Eren can't hear. Then the blonds head is nuzzling into his neck. "You smell sweaty..." Armin mumbles to himself. But his hands wrap around Eren's neck. "Hold me until Eld and Petra come back ok... I don't... I don't want to be alone..."

Eren swallows hard. His hands start to shake.

what if-- what if I transform??

what if I attack him??

what if I eat-

Armin's hands around his neck tightens until Eren has to push him back a little to breathe normally. But Armin's hands stay wrapped around Eren's neck. "Please..." Armin whimpers. "You're the only one left... Let's pretend it's the good old days, ok?"

Eren freezes.

You're the only one left... Let's pretend it's the good old days, ok?

what does that mean?

Eren takes a deep breath and runs his hand through Armin's hair. It's the right thing to do because Almost immediately, some of the tension in Armin's shoulders falls and he rests his head on Eren's shoulders.

"God, my head hurts." Armin growls. "I need some of my grandpa's medicine..."

Mikasa cracks a smile. "Armin, you aren't an old man who needs painkillers to walk."

Armin raises his head. "Well, currently my memory is all foggy and I see you with an ear length hair." He makes an unpleasant sound and rubs his temple. "And... And Much Much taller..."

Eren and Mikasa exchange a look. "Ok, maybe he does need a painkiller. What happened?"

Armin shrugs. "The beer... It had something in it." he sighs. "Some external thingie I... I can't think right now."

"It's ok. Then just rest and fall asleep." Mikasa offers. "You can think when it's out of your system."

Armin nods.

No other offer sounds as tempting as that. He puts his head on the wagon and immediately falls asleep.

Thankfully, when Eld and Petra come back, they don't wake up Armin. Stohess at night is even more beautiful than day.

One month passes from the day he met with Annie and Marco and the day has finally come.

Armin, Mikasa and Eren were assigned with the Levi squad in the center. Their friends are in the right wing and far, far away from them.

Armin holds his rein tightly in his hand. His eyes focused on Erwin, Miche and Hange in the front.

Erwin raises his hand and yells. "ONWARDS!"

And just like that, it's the fifty-seventh expedition beyond the walls.

Armin never takes his eyes off of Eren or Mikasa who are in front of him. They ride with their horses. Armin takes a deep breath, it doesn't take much for him to fall into his soldier mindset, unemotional to what happens around him, the only thing that matters is following commander Erwin's command to whatever place and goal they have this time.

The regiment scatters and soon, Armin, Eren and Mikasa are left with Levi squad, charging towards a forest in the horizon.

That is the place, that's the place they are planning to capture Annie and they will fail. This time however, Armin's sole objective is to stop the massacre of the Levi squad.

He knows he can't convince Annie not to do it, just like he can't just convince Eren not to do the rumbling, so he has to play the part of a master manipulator instead.

With each passing second that they got closer to the forest, Armin's heart beat more rapidly in his chest.

But it is all nothing compared to when a titan's footsteps shook the forest. Mikasa and Eren look back and immediately, the titan appears in between the trees. Armin recognises it.

The female titan.

Two soldiers deploy to stop her but Annie immediately crushes them without a second thought. Mikasa draws her blade the moment one of those soldiers meets her end. "It's the titan!"

"Permission to engage in battle, Captain!" Petra yells.

Mikasa remembers herself and grinds her teeth.

"We need to fight that titan!" Gunther shouts. "It's getting closer!"

"Captain!" Olou yells. "She is getting--"

Annie crushes the second soldier and starts running on top of her speed. Armin can see a maddening look in her eyes.

that's Annie.

THAT'S ANNIE!

Slowly, Eren is raising his hand and moments away from biting on it. Mikasa doesn't seem so eager to sit back and watch either.

"No, Eren-Mikasa!" Armin yells. "No! It's not the time!?"

Eren takes a deep breath. He lowers his hand and takes the reins of his horse again. He clicks his tongue and shuts his eyes. Mikasa keeps staring ahead, whispering quietly enough that no one could hear her.

"Captain!"

Levi raises a flare to the sky. "Cover your ears." It's all he says before an ugly sound of explosion echoes all around them. Armin covers his ears and shuts his eyes, Annie however, doesn't look impressed.

"Another footstep!" Mikasa suddenly yells.

Armin and the rest of the squad snap their heads in her direction but it's too late, she has already switched to ODM gear and is ready to jump from her horse. "THERE IS ANOTHER FOOTSTE--"

Armin hears it.

When he turns his head to the right, he can only see the armored titans' crystallized body from between the leaves.

No...

Reiner is...

Reiner isn't...

The armored hand closes around Armin's body. A scream is torn from his throat when a giant hand takes him away. Reiner jumps between their formation and makes Eld and Petra fall from their horses.

Armin's head hurts from the sudden movement. He's spinning around in the air until the armor stops. Armin tries to push himself out of the armored titans fist but it's too tight. The titans mouth opens and an earth shaking roar echoes in the air.

The armor holds Armin up like a prize.

His head is spinning, rolling around nothing. A warmth travels down his forehead and Armin has enough clearance of mind to know he's injured.

Roar

Armin knows what that sound means.

It's a challenge.

It's a threat.

The roar means that the rogue titan should show himself. He's challenged. Eren is being challenged.

Armin is too slow.

He looks down, hand stretched out and eyes begging Eren silently "No, WAIT--"

Eren brings his hand up and bites on it, hard enough to draw blood. Yellow lightning travels to the air and Eren's body explodes. What was left of the horses was spooked away by it.

Levi clicks his tongue, he takes a close look at Eren's titan with a sneer. "That bastard. So Erwin was right." he growls. "Oi, ACKERMAN!"

Mikasa jumps to a branch, watching Eren rise from the streams and meet Reiners roar with a gut wrenching one of his own.

"Captain! What do we do!?" It's Eld who yells this, next to him Oluo and Petra draw out their blades simultaneously. Gunther looks at his injured stomach but takes out his blades too.

Levi stands up, disgusted by the blood of the horses. "One thing for sure, we need that boy to control the big bad titan here. you four keep that bitch back while we deal with the shithead over there." he yells.

"Yes sir!" they all yell at the same time.

Levi flies to the place Mikasa is watching the battle. "If there are any other secrets you need to reveal it now," he growls.

"None, sir." is all Mikasa says. She grips her blades and grinds her teeth. "I know one thing, we need to get Armin before the armored eats him or worse--"

Mikasa doesn't wait to think, he jumps down and aims for the armored titans' nape. She brings her blades down with a battle cry.

It's no use because her blades snap in half in front of her.

She pulls herself back, shock written all over her face.

Eren roars another time. His movements aren't precise and he ends up throwing himself over the armored titans body with a punch, one that the armored easily evades. Even with one hand, The armored titan can easily block all of Eren's attacks.

Levi narrows his eyes at the sight. "So our blades can't pierce your skin..." he whispers. "So what can we cut? Soft flesh?"

damn it. A few seconds later Erwin would have been able to catch the female titan!

In that very moment, Levi takes a look back at his squad. His eyes widen in shock when he can see Gunther's body on the ground. The female missing his eyes and the other three piercing the female titans arms.

well, I have to act soon.

And there, The armored has made the critical choice of raising Arlerts barely moving body to his mouth.

Right on time.

"Ackerman!" Levi shouts. Mikasa looks back at him. Levi makes a slicing motion with his fingers at the right side of his lips. Thankfully, Mikasa gets what he means.

They both attack at the same time. They slice his mouth and Mikasa jumps in to pull Armin out of his mouth. Then, Eren punches him in his mouth.

"Armin! Are you ok??" Mikasa asks, shaking his body.

Armin rubs his temple. "I'm... I'm alright... Just my head and-- oh." Armin swallows hard and looks at Levi. "Captain Levi, please leave

the armor to the three of us and disarm the female titan." He asks. "Our blades are technically useless against the armored titans but I know what to tell Eren to make him defeat the armored."

"Really, brat?"

Armin can't stop the desperation from slipping into his voice. "Please, Captain Levi!"

Although he doesn't show it, Levi is worried about his squad, so he changes his blades and yells. "If you want to get yourself killed, be my guest."

Armin tries to stand up to his feet but fails. Mikasa doesn't help him up, she is staring at the titan battle ahead and her mind moving frantically on what to do. "We can't do anything, Mikasa." He whispers. "But Eren-- Eren should know that--"

Dirt rises above the ground. Eren is thrown across the jungle until he hits a tree. The poor tree falls to the ground. "EREN!" Mikasa and Armin scream at the same time.

Mikasa jumps into action while Armin is forced to stay there and watch. Because if Reiner's damaged jaw, he pulls Eren out from his titan body with his hands, yanking Eren from his titan form.

Mikasa jumps and strikes his eyes at the same time. "Let him go, you titan!!" she yells. Eren falls from the titan's hand, too limp to move.

"No! Mikasa! His skin is too hard!!" Armin yells.

But it's too late.

Mikasa makes the same mistake of striking Reiner's nape. This time however, she isn't lucky enough and both of her snapped blades hit herself. One over her forehead and one right under her eyes.

Reiner stands still until his eyes heal, Mikasa rolls down from his body and hits the ground.

Armin's feet are frozen.

He clutches the clothes above his heart and gasps.

no...

NO!

He's running before he's given his feet the command to run. Running, running, running towards the place Mikasa fell.

Why would...

Why would Annie and Reiner come together?

Armin ignores the fight between Annie and Levi's squad behind him and kneels down next to Mikasa's limp body. "Mikasa?" he asks, shaking her by her shoulders.

She doesn't respond. The bruise on her neck, forehead and under her eyes starts to look nasty and dangerous. Armin fights the panic rising in his chest. What he was thinking comes to his mind and he immediately grabs Mikasa's body to the best of his ability. She feels heavy in his arms or maybe Armin is too weak.

Armin throws his own ODM and lands in a far branch. He secures her place on the tree with her ODM, making sure Mikasa doesn't accidentally fall.

Reiner is quickly healing but Armin has just enough time to land on the ground on the place Eren has fallen unconscious.

He drops to his knees and rolls Eren to his back. Eren is bleeding from black and blue bruises all over his body.

Eren is injured.

And Mikasa is unconscious on that tree, her head bleeding from the deep cut on her forehead. Armin won't let his mind believe she might not survive.

Reiner is still completely still from the blow Mikasa gave his face. Armin looks back at Annie's titan with the Levi squad.

"Armin..."

Eren gasps, blood falls from his lips and splashes over Armin. Armin looks down, his mind forgets there is anything else going on.

Eren's jade green eyes are bloodshot. Too kind, too soft, Eren's hands find Armin's. "I... I don't think I can ma... make it." he says, his lips stretched to a smile.

A bitter, ugly smile.

Armin holds him tighter. "No! You're not dying on me!" Armin shouts, panic rises into his voice and into the shake of his hands.

Eren doesn't respond.

Armin's mind runs a thousand thoughts a second as he tries to find a way. His eyes stare into Eren's green eyes, pleading him to keep them open and awake.

The ground starts to shake when Annie's female titan slowly steps towards them.

Armin looks at her, all color leaves his face when her titan kneels down, dangerously close to them.

With Reiner there... There is no one that can save Eren if he gets captured by Annie. No one can pull Eren out of this mess other than himself. The moment Eren's eyes start to lose focus, Armin acts up.

The last straw.

A solution that may not even work.

But it's Armin's last solution.

He draws one of his ODM gear blades and swings it in the air.

He has nothing to lose.

He holds the unconscious Eren close to his chest and presses the cold hard blade against his own throat. He makes sure Eren is securely in his arms when he presses the cold of his blade harder to his neck. Armin shuts his eyes and hisses under his breath when he accidentally makes a niche.

This blade is sharp enough to break titan skin after all.

Annie's eyes widen, she seems to have read his mind. She rushes forward to stop him but Armin is faster. He slices his own throat with one swift motion.

Blood starts pouring down his throat and onto his shirt. Armin's eyes immediately blur. His hands keep their death grip on Eren's body.

He doesn't feel himself hit the grass and mud on the ground.

"God damn it, Armin!"

There is a consistent pressure in Armin's throat and then, nothing. It's as good as new.

Armin gasps awake and his eyes look around frantically. He sees nothing but white sand and a glowing tree and of course--

Eren cups his face. His thumbs move under his eyes. His jade green eyes search every inch of his face, worry leaking from his eyes. "What happened?" he asks. "You-- you slit your own throat!"

Armin shakes his head. He puts his hands over Eren's and nods. "I-I need your help!" he gasps, he doesn't notice how wet and desperate he sounds. "A-Annie and Rein-Reiner attacked together and Le-Le-Levi squad is."

Eren shushes him gently. His thumbs move under his eyes and slowly wipe the tears away. "Hush now, I won't understand what you mean if you stutter like that."

"Mi-Mikasa and Eren they are-- they are dying!" Armin manages to whimper. "Annie and Re-Reiner attack-attacker together and our forces can't fight both of them off without thunder spears! I-I need your help!"

Eren hums, a look of recognition passes his jade eyes and his eyes focus on somewhere past Armin. "So that's why he's here." he whispers.

Who?

Armin looks around and to his surprise, Eren, *His Eren*, is lying down unconscious on white sand.

"You brought him here." Eren of the paths explains. He lets go of Armin and stands up. He walks over to Eren and kicks him in his side.

Eren rolls around but stays unconscious. "God, little me is such an idiot." he sighs. "Idiot and useless. He got all these bruises from Reiner didn't he?"

Armin shakes the shock from his body. He stumbles forward and takes Eren's body into his hands. Eren has yet to open his eyes but his wounds don't bleed anymore. And his chest rises and falls on a normal rhythm.

Armin hugs him tightly, he pushes his ears into his chest to hear the soothing rhythm of his heartbeat, the tension leaves Armin's body

almost immediately.

The blonde looks up at Eren of the paths, his purple/blue eyes burn with unknown emotions. "Heal him," he pleads. "Please. Heal him."

Eren grinds his teeth. "Is that why you slit your throat? In a small hope that it would bring him to the paths?"

Armin's hands around Eren's body tighten. "Yes." he says without hesitating.

"That's the worst excuse I've ever heard." Eren whispers. "For him??" He shoots another kick aimed at Eren's side.

Armin hisses through his grit teeth. "Hey! Stop kicking him!"

Eren kneels down, an eyebrow raised. "Fine. Just cuz you asked." he murmurs. His hands gather a handful of white sand and pour it on the wound on Eren's face. "Idiot." he whispers. Eren of the paths pushes as much sand as he can on Eren's body dismissively.

Eren's body starts steaming and when he gasps, his mouth opens. Armin hugs him again.

Everything will be fine...

Everything will be fine...

"Thank... Thank you?" he whispers.

Eren doesn't move, no response.

Eren takes a deep breath, he looks at Armin with a smirk. "You're welcome, Minnie?" he asks.

"You-- you keep calling me 'Minnie' but you never did before!" Armin whispers. "You never-- never called me Minnie!?!"

Eren snaps his fingers.

The path slips from around him like he has woken up from a deep sleep.

The ground is shaking by the time Armin opens his eyes.

Crack crack sounds fill the air and for the first time, it's not Eren's titan yelling in pain but Reiners.

Armin gasps awake. He jumps to his feet and looks ahead at the titan fight in front of him. To his surprise, Reiners nape was wide open, Eren had managed to break it with his grip.

Armin's eyes widened in shock.

Eren stands up, his fully healed titan standing tall and strong in front of the armored titan.

And then, Eren shoves his hand into Reiner's poor nape and pulls his human form out. His roar fills the jungle.

Armin turns around to Annie and Levi's squad. Just as he guessed, defeating Annie without thunder spears is impossible even for the Levi squad. All Annie had to do was cover her nape and play around Levi squads attacks.

All this stops to a halt when Eren yells and holds up Reiners unconscious body up for Annie to see. He roars again.

And then, Eren does something Armin never thought he would. He throws Reiner as far as he can in the forest, challenging Annie to choose.

Annie narrows her titans eyes.

She takes a step away.

And another, and another. Until she's running at full force to the place Reiner was thrown.

Armin can read Eren's thoughts. "Captain Levi, Sir! We need to move out! Call Commander Erwin!" he yells just before Eren scoops him in his titan arms and reaches to take Mikasa from the place Armin has secured her. Armin takes Mikasa from Eren's giant titan hands and holds her tightly. They sit comfortably in Eren's giant hand.

Armin can hear Levi order his squad to retreat. They take Gunther's body with great care and ride back on their horses.

Eren raises them to his eyes, just to look at them closer. Armin smiles, he exhales all the stress in his body. "I'm ok, Eren. Mikasa is too." Armin assures him, touching the titans face.

Eren runs away, Levi's squad follows him quickly.

Until they are on the edge of the forest and where they left their horses and carriages. Eren transforms after he has gently lowered Armin and Mikasa into the carriage.

He ignores the shocked glances he receives from Petra, Olou and Eld. Levi however, doesn't look shocked. He climbs next to his friends. He makes sure Mikasa is lying as comfortably as she could while unconscious.

And Armin is lying right next to her.

"Oi, brat." Levi yells before Eren can touch Armin. He narrows his eyes. "I think you owe an apology to my squad."

Eld and Olou don't look at him directly. They are too busy lowering Gunther's body into the carriage next to Armin.

Eren swallows hard. "I'm sorry." he said, lowering his head in apology. "I had no idea the titans would follow me, or even who they are or what they want."

He fists his hands.

"I'm so sorry." he mumbles.

Petra and Oluo exchange a look. Neither said anything. The rest of Levi's squad hop on their horses other than Eld who rides the carriage. Eren doesn't meet any of their eyes, not even when the carriage starts moving.

Eren looks back at the forest as it slowly dissolves into the horizon. The view isn't beautiful in any way, engraved in his memory with the stench of blood and Gunther's death.

"You... You saved us..."

Eren looks down. Armin looks tired, his hand slowly moves up to take Eren's hand that is tightly fisted over his thigh. Eren takes a deep breath, "I... I don't know what got the better of me I just--"

"Hush now..." Armin mumbles, his hands sneaking to take Eren's hands into his own. Eren lets him do as he pleases. He never expects it. Armin takes his hand and presses it into his own face, nuzzling into it. "Thank you... Eren..."

Eren smiles into it, he caresses Armin's soft skin with his thumb. "You're concussed, Armin..." he whispers. "You have no idea who you're talking to."

His smile felt genuine and his heart felt content.

Who is Eren to deny a feeling as simple as this?

Jean will describe the return to the walls as chaotic.

Not even he could conjure up a reason for this expedition and the dozens of lives sacrificed for this. They heard the rogue titan, which Connie confirmed to be him after he sneaked inside to take a look at the titan fight in the forest.

The armor and the female were also present.

Connie was pale when he came back, his hands were shaking as he described the fight, but he assured him and Sasha that Levi's squad was handling it adequately. The identity of the rogue, female and armored were all still wrapped in a cocoon of mystery.

So, Jean wasn't expecting Mikasa to have a large gash under her eyes and one scar above her forehead, the next time he saw her.

Jean finds himself staring at the horizon from the gate of Trost. He still hasn't found the courage in himself to go and check on his parents.

So what? So that he can see that they haven't healed? To be reminded that if the walls fall--

His solitude is disrupted when he hears a zipping sound. Someone is going to join him and Jean can't say he's happy about it.

"Sorry for interrupting your peace." the intruder says and Jean immediately knows who he is.

Armin wipes the sweat from his forehead and stands up to his feet. "But I need to talk to you."

"Me first. What happened there?" Jean asks, looking directly at Armin. "I know for a fact that Mikasa won't be injured like this unless--"

"Titan fight." Armin interrupts, his eyes fall to the scar under Mikasa's eyes, it's deep and Jean doubts it will ever heal. Not that it would affect Mikasa's beauty in any way.

Armin steps closer. "Jean..." he murmurs, the door creaks as it closes behind him and leans against it to make sure the door stays closed. Armin's eyes raise up and meet Jeans. "I need your help with something. Regarding our mutual friend, Marco. He's in danger."

Marco? In danger?

Jean hums.

"I'm all ears."

"Aaannie!"

"ANNIE!"

Hitch hits her playfully on her shoulder. She herself was wet from head to toe and wrapped under towels. Now that sleep is slowly leaving Annie's mind, she can hear some knocking on their door.

"Annie-O, I bet someone's looking for you. And I'm in the middle of my bath, Annie." Hitch whispers. "And the knocking is making me crazy!"

Annie slowly cracks an eye. She slowly sits up and rubs the side of her head. "What is it this time?"

"Knocking..."

"Yeah, and why don't you open it?"

"Because I was in the middle of my bath! With bubbles and a good book. Your questionable sleep schedule ruined it." Hitch says. She doesn't wait to explain further, she walks away from her bed and goes to the bath. She winks and blows a kiss, then bangs the door of the bath closed.

Annie stands up, her eyebrows pulling into a tight frown, someone better be dying for her to be interrupted on her day off. She opens the door and immediately clicks her tongue. "Marco! It's our day off. What do you want??" she snaps.

Marco, in civilian attire, slowly raises his hands in defeat. "No, No it's not that, someone wanted to see you and I told him you're usually

sleeping by now and..."

Marco clears his throat. "Guess who has returned from the expedition in one piece?" he smiles.

Annie's eyes widened. "Armin??"

Marco nods. "Yeah, he and Jean have come to visit! So if you want to go to the bar..." he trails off.

Annie nods. "I'll be there soon."

She closes the door and changes into the first hoodie she finds and a clean pair of pants. She doesn't bother to tell Hitch about her plans. But when she opens the door and realizes maybe, her changing had taken a lot of time.

Because Armin is on the other side, a surprised smile on her face. "Oh, Hi Annie..." he waves slowly to get her attention.

Annie stands frozen in the doorway.

There's awkward silence between the two.

Annie's crystal eyes slowly look away, so does Armin as he mirrors her.

A door opens and Annie curses her luck because it's Hitch who comes out of the bathroom and sees Armin at the door. Her back is to Hitch, but she can see the smirk on her lips. Hitch, ever the drama lover, taps Annie on her shoulder and moves away like a purring cat. "I'll just leave you two alone..." she murmurs, letting her hand linger over Annie's shoulders a little as she slips away. "Feel free to invite your body inside! I'll leave if you want to."

"No, we were leaving to a bar." Annie says and steps out. She closes the door in Hitch's face. It makes a loud bang.

Armin licks his lips. "Hey Annie... Long time no see..." he says, smiling shyly. "I thought I'd pay a visit now that I'm in town... You were taking a long time so I uh... Thought I should just say hi and go back to base"

Annie leans against the door, she crosses her arms over her chest. "They let you out?"

Armin shrugs. "More or less... A Lot of things happened in that expedition that I'm not allowed to tell anyone..." Armin trails off. "They knew locking me up wasn't very convenient."

Armin points at the back of the building with his thumb. "You know, Jean went to surprise Marco. They're going to a bar. Should we go? I bet it'll be fun." He asks, a little quietly and lacking the usual confidence in his voice.

Annie freezes for a moment. "Should I... Are you asking me out?" she asks blatantly.

I never got the chance to in another life. Might as well try it out here .
Armin thinks nonchalantly.

Armin looks away as a red blush reaches his face. "I mean it... It can be...? Certainly not what I was hoping for but--"

Annie crosses her arms over her chest. "You can hang out with other, more cheerful girls, Armin."

"Yeah, but I don't share any memories or interests with any of them." He says back. "I mean... I understand if you don't want to waste your off day with us but uhm..." Armin rubs the back of his head. "Forget it... Uhm... I'm sorry for interrupting your peace."

"Where is the bar?" Annie asks, "is Marco's favorite place? Because I'm not paying so much for a ridiculously expensive beer."

Armin smiles. "I have no idea. Marco invited us so I think it is." he says and takes out a piece of paper. "He wrote down the address."

"That idiot." Annie whispers.

Armin blinks a few times and then decides not to say anything. Armin and Annie walk out of the military police station in relative silence.

The streets of Stohess are as busy as ever. Annie is sure she has seen the residents' faces a couple of times but none of those faces have names.

But the people wave and send their hellos because she is "officer Marco"s partner and Marco *had* to show his kindness to every soul he met.

"good morning."

"hello there!"

"how is officer Marco! Send him my regards! The thief he caught a few days ago--"

Armin laughs when an old woman walks up to them and smiles at Annie. "Thank you, officer Annie." she says. "You and Officer Marco were really helpful when my son was wrongly accused."

Annie nods mindlessly, little by little her face falls and Armin pulls her back with a gentle smile. Annie pulls her hoodie back up to stop any one else from recognising her. She is this close to just asking for another work partner because Marco is just too much trouble apparently.

Armin shoves his hands into his pockets as he walks. "Marco's doing I assume?" he asks. "He's a people's charmer."

Annie clicks her tongue. "He thinks he *has* to help everyone that walks into the station." she says with disgust. "And pulls me down with him."

A bitter smile paints Armin's face. "He loves his job." he says with a bitter tone.

Annie just hums.

Then, a flash of realization passes Armin's face. "By the way, my grandpa sent this. Although I told him you have access to much better stuff in the interior." Armin says, giving her a soft circular piece of donut wrapped in a paper bag.

Armin smiles. "Courtesy of Eren's mom. Grandpa sent this after I told him you like sweets." he explains.

Annie takes the bag and opens it hesitantly. She takes out one sugar iced donut. She blinks in surprise. The last one she had one of those-- she was back at Marley, and the person who gave it to her--

I don't care if you make the entire world your enemy, just come back home!

"Annie?"

Annie snaps out of her trance. She looks at Armin's face, he's smiling awkwardly. "Is it... Is it not to your liking?"

But Armin....

Annie narrows her eyes, thoughtfully.

Armin was on that expedition. He looked at her like he knew who she was. She was on Eren's side and slit his throat for some reason.

Annie's eyes fall on his throat, it's smooth and scarless.

what happened there?

does he know?

if he does...

Annie grinds her teeth together.

no. Maybe he doesn't know. I shouldn't make him suspect it or else--

"It would be rude for me to eat it all alone." Annie says seriously. She tears the donut in half and offers the smaller half to Armin.

Armin accepts it with a smile. He licks his lips and shakes it a little so some of the sugar icing falls. He takes a bite without hesitating.

"Hmm, a little too sweet for my liking." he says while chewing. "But anything that my grandpa sends is cherished." he shakes the rest of the sugar off then takes another bite.

That's when Annie starts eating it with a more at ease mind, almost too fast. The donut tastes nice. Too nice. Homemade and warm. "It's hard to believe someone as bitter as Eren can be born from someone like his mom." Annie hums. "Unbelievable." She takes a large bite of the donut and swallows it down, eating as if she was being chased.

Armin grins. "Glad you liked it! We're close to the bar by the way, according to the address Marco gave me it should be... Here!"

Armin runs and Annie runs after her. Her movements stop to a halt when she sees the bar underground and there are stairs leading to the crowded but underground bar.

Armin shoves his hands into his pocket. "It looks like I have enough money too." he hums as he walks down the stairs.

Annie stays up, looking down at the place thoughtfully.

so this is it, huh?

is this your trap, Armin?

Annie takes her father's ring and slowly puts it on her index finger. She stares at Armin's back, thinking what she should do now.

Armin stops when he notices she isn't coming. "Annie? Is everything alright?" he asks, looking up.

Annie narrows her eyes. "This... This is an underground bar..." she whispers. "I... I won't come here..."

"You don't like this? Are you... Afraid of it?"

Annie's face stays emotionless. "That's the Eren in you speaking." she says, an edge of threat to her voice.

Armin raises his hands in surrender. "Yeah, I admit. That was the Eren in me speaking." he admits. "We can go somewhere else tho, this is your city so, I'm open to any suggestions."

Annie blinks in surprise.

Armin walks back up and stands next to her. "I'm at your service, Annie. If you have me, that is..." he adds, looking away when a blush rises to his face.

If Armin is suspecting me of being a titan, why bring me here in the middle of the crowd?

Annie narrows her eyes again.

No, maybe he has plans for after that. Remember the plan he had to save Krista from the bandits? It was multilayered and perfectly accounted for.

Or Maybe-- and bear with me-- he just wants to hang out.

Annir hums thoughtfully.

"Any suggestions?" Armin asks again.

"I... Have a few." Annie says instead.

The day passes as fast as a blink of an eye.

Annie finds herself enjoying Armin's company more and more every second. The places they went were simple because Annie didn't want to corner herself in the fear of Armin having a grand plan of arresting her. They walked through the streets and bumped into a food stall more than a couple of times. The city was beautiful and most importantly, Armin understood the value of silence and didn't force her to talk.

Before she knew it, she and Armin were sitting in front of a big fountain in the city center.

It's Armin who breaks the silence. "Well... Annie, this is fun." he murmurs. "I never knew Stohess could do so... Relaxing..."

He chuckles. "No wonder everyone wants to come in here," he laughs.

Annie just cracks a smile.

"Look, it's ANNIE! ARMIN!"

And just like that, Annie's smile falls from her face. Marco jumps and Jean walks on his toe. "There you are!" he mumbles. "We looked everywhere for you!"

Marco smiles. "This calls for a beer!"

Annie pinches her nose. "Marco--"

"Mr Swissman! Four beers please!"

Jean blinks in surprise. "Armin and I have to be on duty tomorrow, you know? And all we've done today is to check one beer bar after another!"

Marco ignores it and goes straight to the parlor. He comes back balancing four drinks in one tray and puts it near the fountain. He

shoves one in each of their hands and holds his own high. "So-cheers!" he says. "I hope I get to do this every time you guys come back from an expedition."

if you come back . goes unsaid.

Annie hits her glass against Armin's and Marco's without much of a thought. She drinks without thinking and doesn't pay attention to whatever conversation the boys were having.

She wants to call it a night and then leave. Maybe tell Armin it's not so fast to convert to the garrisons and save his life but she has to stop.

Because her head feels dizzy.

"Annie?"

Marco's concerned voice takes her by surprise. She rubs the side of her face and massages her eyes but even that doesn't clear her blurry vision.

She doesn't feel her legs as she falls.

Her eyes roll to the back of her head and the last thing she sees is Armin's tearful eyes as he mouths something Annie can't quite catch.

Her body spasms angrily, shaking violently and her mouth starts to foam. Marco shouts for help but Jean stays and watches with curious arms.

Annie has enough clearance of mind to understand what was the last thing that Armin said.

I'm so sorry.

Kudos to the person that can guess where Armin had hidden the poison or how (hint, it was two stages!)

Check out this amazing art from @ taintain_2121 from twt [here!!!!](#)

And that is how you get the female titan without casualty!

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!!

The best parting gift for me is to watch you lea...

Chapter 9: The best parting gift for me is to watch you leave peacefully

Armin has to decide what to do to Annie.

Erwin decides the groups fate after capturing Annie.

Eren and Mikasa receive a strange news about their mother.

tiktok dances into your chrome tab

Check out this amazing art from @ Tiantian_2121 from twt [here!!!!](#)

Lets rock and roll.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

A few hours before.

To say the journey back home is agonizing is an underestimation.

Armin remembers very vividly how strange it felt to walk back into the walls for the first time, the weight of the dead hanging heavy in their mind and the gazes of the people felt even heavier.

Mikasa has awakened on their way back, but she has yet to say something, too busy looking at her own hands in shock. She wonders why she was knocked out of the fight so easily, the

bandage Eren had wrapped around her neck hangs loosely around the fatal wound

However, Armin doesn't remember this part.

When he tries to sit up, Eren puts a hand on his shoulder and heavy bandaged head. "Sit back down, we're going straight to the medical wing."

When their carriage stops, a woman immediately pushes the crowd away and runs to the soldiers on the front. "Have you seen my children??" she says. Her voice is moments away from breaking down. The soldier swallows hard and asks what their names were.

"Mikasa Ackerman and Eren- Eren Yeager!" she says.

Eren and Mikasa's eyes immediately look in the woman's direction. Their eyes soften when they see it's Carla. Mikasa waves and she sees them.

Carla doesn't have any grace when she jumps and hugs both of her children as tightly as she could. Mikasa returns the hug but Eren's hands are hesitant, as much as he's afraid to touch anything of value with the titans hands.

Armin watches them, quietly. He notices the other soldiers who want to separate them but they all stop when they notice their former commander, Keith Shadis, shaking his head a few feet away.

"Mom, it's ok. We're here." Eren tells her.

Carla lets out a shaky relieved breath. "You two... Will give me a heart attack." she sighs loudly. She pulls back, a water smile is on her face. "Let's go to the restaurant. I have something ready for--"

"Mom, but Armin..."

Armin rubs his bandaged throat. "It's ok, go on, you know I can't come." he assures him. "Don't worry, Eren. Nothing will happen to

me."

Eren hesitates but his mother's will is too strong to resist. Carla drags her children, still stunned that they have survived, into her home.

"Is it wise to just let them go, sir?" Petra asks, watching Mikasa and Eren leave with hawk sharp eyes.

Levi hops down from his horse. "Relax there, it's not like he can get away from here." he hums, petting his horse. "The person who has to give answers is right here, isn't that right, Arlert?"

Armin keeps his mouth tightly shut.

There is nothing he can say in his defense.

"Armin-"

The sound of his name takes him by surprise. Armin slowly turns around. His grandfather slowly comes towards them with his wooden leg and a cane.

"Grandpa!" Armin says without meaning to. He looks at Levi with pleading eyes. Captain Levi sighs and makes a dismissive motion with his hands. "Five minutes." Levi orders. "You better be back after that."

Armin nods while whispering a small "thank you"

His grandfather hugs Armin as tightly as his weak arms would allow. He runs his wrinkled hands through his blond hair, the old man smells of soup and new books. Armin slowly closes his eyes. "There you are Armin, I was terrified for a second." his grandfather says. "My heart can't take much of this you know?"

"Don't talk like that grandpa!" Armin pulls back and smiles. "Trust me, nothing will happen to me."

Now that Armin can look a little more closely at the old man's face, he can say that he has aged significantly in the past month. His eyes looked tired and wrinkles more prominent. Also, his grayish hair was now completely white.

Armin's eyes softened. "Please, Grandpa, nothing will happen to me in these expeditions. I promise to always come back."

Any date before the third day of summer in the year 854 and you can be sure I'm alive.

But he can't tell his grandfather that. He can't tell him he has a fixed death date and he physically can't die before that.

"There is a lot in this world you can't control, my boy." his grandfather tells him. "But your promise is enough for me, Armin."

Armin gives him a polite smile.

"Now go, your superior ordered you to return." His grandpa reminds him.

Armin takes a deep breath and nods.

After all, orders are orders.

"Well, Well, Well, it appears my hypothetical guess was correct!" Hange says, putting their feet crossed on Erwin's office table. "So, Eren Yeager huh, can't wait to meet that boy!" they say, lacing their fingers in front of their face.

"Section commander!" Moblit whispers in their ear. "That's the commander's table!"

But the said commander doesn't care. He has his mind full with many more unsolved questions. He stares out of his office window and bears the strange looks Levi and Miche give him.

"So you saw him transform?" Erwin asks for the tenth time.

Levi clicks his tongue. "With my own bloodied eyes and so did everyone else in my squad." he spits the words angrily. "Eren seems to know what he was doing. Arlert and Ackerman didn't seem shocked one bit."

"So they knew." Miche points out. "Does that mean there are other titans in the 104th? Other titans he knew?"

Erwin rubs his chin. "We don't have proof. What we do have proof for, is that this female titan and armored titan know Armin, because they went straight for him."

Erwin looks at Miche from the corner of his eyes. "Have everyone in the 104th quarenteed near the ruins of Utgard castle with your castle. Eren and his friends included. But... Not for now."

"What do you mean?" Miche asks.

Erwin doesn't answer him. "Levi." he says and Levi arches an eyebrow. "Let the kids a little loose so if they want to sneak out- they can. But have one of your squad following them secretly wherever they go."

Hange jumps. "Oh, dear commander, I wonder what you're thinking!" they say, slowly tapping their fingers against the table. "Oh I know! You think if we let them just wander around, he'll eventually lead us to the armored and female, am I right?"

Erwin nods.

This should work.

Something tells him it's going to work out soon.

Now

Annie fell to the ground.

Armin's heart fell with it. He looks at her with guilt all over his eyes. Next to him, Jean lets out a deep breath caged in his lungs. "Man-Man that was close." he sighs.

On the other hand, Marco, who is unaware of everything, keeps trying to wake her up and checks her pulse. "Jean, Armin, call the doctors! We need to get her to the--"

Armin nods. "Jean and I will take her to a hospital, you go and alert the nearby police!" he says.

And somehow, Marco buys the excuse. Jean takes Annie and together they move to an abandoned narrow street near them, there is no sign of any humans or any living being, other than rats, around them.

Jean kneels down next to her. "So are we just going to hope she doesn't wake up?" he asks.

Armin shakes his head. "We don't," he says. "GUYS! We need a hand."

At his yell, their friend jumps down from the roof in full ODM gear. Sasha and Connie remove their hoodies to stare at Annie's unconscious body. "Armin-- are you, are you sure it's Annie?" Sasha asks. "I mean it's- it's impossible!"

Eren and Mikasa take off their hoods, they seem more or less convinced, however. They nod as well. "I mean- you're never wrong but- but this is--" Eren blinks in surprise.

Armin puts his beer away. "It doesn't matter anymore. I'm certain of it. The female titan is Annie. And I'm willing to prove it to the higher ups." he promises.

Connie crosses his arms over his chest. "Ok, but how the hell are we going to take her to a dungeon," he asks. "They won't just open a dungeon because we asked."

Armin pushes his hands into his pocket. "Not us. But they will if Levi squad wants one."

"Levi squad??" Eren gasps.

"Yes. Isn't that right, Eld, Olou, Petra? Captain Levi will believe us if they report this little incident." Armin says, looking at the roof. "You can come out now, I know you three have been following us without break since we returned from the expedition."

Eren laughs. "Armin... We would have noticed if they'd been following us!"

Armin doesn't take his eyes off of the roof.

The next moment, the familiar sound of ODM echoes around them in that empty street.

A hooded figure lands, they remove their hood and an angry Petra is what is behind it. "You three." she snarls. "You're gonna be in bad trouble if this woman isn't the female titan!"

Mikasa narrows her eyes.

"Petra has been following me."

Armin was shocked to hear that. He puts down the book he was reading in the castle's library.

Mikasa had found him alone and had whispered those words in his ear because not only was Petra on the roof of the castle, but she also spotted Olou near Armin almost constantly.

Not to mention Eld near Eren.

"Are you certain?" Armin whispers back. "Me and Eren too?"

Mikasa nods.

Armin had taken a deep breath. "Ok, pretend you didn't notice. It's actually going to help us later."

"How?"

Armin's face twisted into a crooked smile. "We'll see." he then hugged her tightly and whispered in her ear. "Now let's pretend we were talking about Eren's birthday when we get out of the castle. We don't need them to suspect us."

Now, it seems obvious why Armin was accepting their surveillance so happily. They were good at their job. If Mikasa hadn't spotted Petra near her mothers restaurant that one time, she wouldn't have noticed.

Armin looks down at Annie. "She is." he assures her. "I can prove it to you."

Petra narrows her eyes. "If you harm her in any way-- I'll handcuff you and give you away to the first MP I see."

Armin ignores her words, and she turns to Mikasa. "Mikasa, can I have one of your blades?"

She hums. Then she takes out one of her new blades from her ODM and gives it to him.

Armin looks at his own reflection on the blade for a moment. "Petra? From the injured titans you've witnessed, how did they heal when injured?"

Petra presses her mouth to a thin line. "They burst into steam and--"

Armin doesn't wait, he stabs Annie's abdomen with the blade and makes the entire group gasp. He yanks the blade out of her body, blood slowly pools under her.

"ARMIN!"

"That's it you little--"

But Eren and Petra stare, shocked, because her wound starts to steam and snitches itself together.

(Eren clutches the cloth above his heart, trying to calm his nonexistent heart. He looks at Annie's body and thinks how in the world is Annie also a monster of his kind?)

Petra grinds her teeth. "She's a titan." she growls. "And of course-- she even looks like the female titan." Petra grips her blade angrily, rage swims in her eyes. "This--this is it-- she killed Gunther."

Rage blinds her, she swings her blade aimed at Annie. But two other hooded figures fall, one of them grabs her shoulders and the other stands above Annie's body. "Shit, this really is her." Olou growls, pulling off his hood.

"Petra, Calm down." Eld orders as he lets her go. "Remember what Captain Levi ordered us!"

"Yeah, this shitty tiny thing isn't worth getting the captain angry." Olou growls. "And you! You six!" he says, pointing his blade at the group. "What the hell were you thinking! What if she transformed and raised this entire town to dust!"

Jean steps forward. "I'm sorry, this was my idea. My friends were just following me." he says, looking between Eld, Olou and Petra.

Always the martyr . Armin thinks, looking at Jean's back.

He raises his hand too. "Yeah, we convinced the others to come. It was our plan, not theirs."

"Save all these excuses for commander Erwin." Petra yells. "You two, help us move her to headquarters. The rest of you, back to your dorms now."

When no one moves, Petra yells again: "I SAID GO!"

This time their friends wave goodbye and scatter, their friends other than Armin and Jean leave. All while Jean glares angrily at Armin.

"Don't look at me like that. it was me who roped you into this by saving Marco from danger." Armin says, quietly.

Jean doesn't say anything back.

Erwin laces his hands in front of him, his emotionless eyes looking at the two new renegades in front of him.

When he ordered the Levi squad to keep an eye on these three, never in a million years was he expecting this. To have someone confirmed to be a titan shifter but not confirmed to be the female in their dungeons and two wayward soldiers accepting the guilt of one of the most reckless missions he'd ever seen.

"You two--" Erwin says and points his hand at Jean and Armin, whose faces are neutral but beads of nervous sweat appear on their faces. "--explain, now."

Armin takes a deep breath. His mind starts to weave the most convincing thread of lies he's ever had. He looks the commander straight in his eyes. "Annie and I were close during our cadet days. I spotted some questionable things like the fact that she cut her finger off once but the next day, she was completely healthy. Or the fact that-- that the female titan appeared for the first time to protect me from being eaten."

Armin swallows hard. "I didn't know what to say or what to do... And I thought I was delusional so-- but then..."

Armin shakes his head.

"Then the female and Armored attacked and raided us, and I remembered this quote from my grandfather's favorite books... 'When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth'(1) or something like that. To protect my friend, Marco, from any threats Annie might have, I conducted this plan and asked for Jean's help."

Jean fists his hands behind his back, staying completely silent.

"Is that the truth?" Erwin asks Jean.

"Yes." Jean nods. "His plan was... Filled with some holes that I knew we couldn't fill in alone, so I asked for our friends' help. It worked."

Erwin hums. "Rewind a little. How did you manage to find a tranquilizer strong enough for a titan shifter?"

Armin swallows hard. Here comes the truth. "I've realized that the beer in Marcos favorite bar has special ingredients. One that I reacted badly to." Armin says, remembering how tired and worn out he was after visiting that bar with Marco. "It's nothing but its strong taste made it possible to hide any poison inside it."

Erwin arches an eyebrow. "deadly?"

Armin shakes his head. "Not for a titan shifter--" Armin licks his lips. He pulls a vial filled with Crystals like sugar on the table. Erwin narrows his eyes at it.

"Normally, this toxin is enough to kill humans, but I thought I might have to add ten times as much because her titan form is ten times bigger than herself..." Armin reasons. "However, when I added a lot of it to a beer, it started to reek. And the strong smell and taste of the beer could only conceal so much. So I conceived another plan. One that has two stages. I concealed so much of that poison in a donut and the rest in the beer. When mixed together, they worked."

Jean steps forward. "I told him it might not work, so we stationed our friends with ODM gear near us to stop her if she ever tried to transform before she could. Mikasa's job, actually." he explains. "We managed to sneak in Connie and Sasha as the waiters of the bar to make sure they could poison our drinks just the right amount."

Jean bites his lip. "And pulling Eren's titan into the fight... Was our last straw."

Armin can't read the emotions written behind the blue of commander Erwin's eyes. He never got to know the man well enough to guess what he's thinking right now. What he can guess, however, is that the commander isn't mad.

Armin will dare say he's impressed.

"I have to say..." Erwin whispers as he stands up. "Doing a reckless thing is one thing, making four other people follow you in this reckless thing is another."

Armin shrugs. "That is Jean's strong suit, really. I just planned it all." he hums.

Erwin looks at both of them. "I'm impressed. You two managed to seize one of the enemies without casualty." he says. "But I'm afraid no good deed goes unpunished and what you did falls heavily between the lines of legal and illegal."

Jean looks down. "We know."

"For now, you six will be kept under surveillance. You will be led to your new rooms until I decide what to do with you." Erwin says. "The scouts and the MP will fight over the custody of Annie Leonhardt however premier Zachary is on our side, the case is more or less won."

Erwin sits down. "Petra will lead you and your friends to your rooms, dismissed."

"You weren't expecting it to work, were you?"

Eren throws a pebble into the lake, it hits the water surface once before it drowns.

"Nope..." Eren hums, "it's hard to believe it was Annie..."

Eren turns back to give Krista a fake smile. "This is a secret too, you know," he laughs. "You shouldn't tell anyone about Annie."

Krista puts her hands under her head as she stares at the sky. "Everything you told me has been a secret." she shrugs. "I mean, If you're a titan-- what makes you think Annie can't be one? I mean--"

Krista throws her hands up. "I mean freaking Armin or Reiner could turn out to be a titan and won't be surprised anymore."

A deep cold feeling swims through Eren's body. "Don't talk like that!" he gasps.

"I can talk however I like." she sighs. "The chances of me coming out of that expedition was freaking zero and yet--"

She runs a hand through her face. "Here I am, having a meaningless talk with you." she spits.

"Don't worry, If you keep getting closer to me, you'll end up dying sooner than later." Eren says, sitting next to her. "I'll even let you kill me if you want a heroic death."

Krista raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

Eren chuckles. "What happened to that sweet and kind hearted Krista?"

Krista pushes him back. "Idiot." she growls.

"I'm afraid I can't do that for you, Krista." Eren says finally. "Armin still needs my help. I'm still useful to humanity."

Krista rolls her eyes. "You're right." she sighs. "I guess... I guess Ymir's presence is worth coming back home too."

"Let's form a club." Eren says with a laugh. "The 'I wanna die heroically, but I have one string left to live and I don't know what to do' club."

"What's the point of a club if it's going to stay like this?" Krista clicks her tongue. "You're going to keep nagging about not being able to tell your secret to your mom and I'm going to wallow in self pity."

Krista lies back down. "What's the point?"

Eren shrugs, he raises his head up to look at the moon. "I... Have no idea..."

"And you called *me* fake." she laughs. "Don't think I didn't notice the cheery persona you come up with when you're with others."

"Sorry, Krista. I guess I just learnt from the best." he smirks bitterly.

She laughs, ignorant to Eren's bitter behavior. "Did you tell your mother?"

"Did you tell Ymir?"

"Don't answer my questions with questions." Krista snaps, "answer me, did you talk to your mother about whatever is bothering you!?"

Eren raises his hands in the air. "No ma'am! Please don't kill me, my lady, for I am too scared!" he mocks. "And I asked you. Have *you* told Ymir what you wanted to?"

Krista huffs and puts her chin on her fists.

The silence is enough of its answer.

No.

"Look, Armin! We have our own little room!" Eren says, patting the sofa before he sits on it. "Our beds! Our table! Our sofa, even our chess set!"

Armin puts his bag on the table, he looks around. The room is quite spacious. They didn't get such luxury the first time around. Eren's room was separated from the rest of the boys but this time, since Armin is a vital part of the secret, he's given the same room as Eren. Far from the boys dorm.

Eren patts the spot next to him. "Come on, Minnie! Sit down!"

Armin arches an eyebrow. "Uhm... Since when do you call me 'Minnie'?"

Eren huffs playfully. "I always wanted to. I just don't get the chance when others are watching." he says. "Armin... Can you sit down and tell me all about the outside world?"

Armin blinks in surprise.

"The-the outside world?"

"Yeah, you know-- the outside world. Ocean! Land made of ice! Desserts!" Eren prompts, he hits the empty spot on the sofa. "Please. Tell me about them again."

Armin sits down.

Talking about his dreams looked effortless a lifetime ago but now...

Now Armin can't remember much about why it was so beautiful to him the first time around.

"Well, uhm. There are uhm... Oceans..." he says, not wanting Eren to get sad or suspicious. "A lake so big you can't see the bottom and

it stretches all over the horizon and--"

This is Nicolo! A master of Marleyan seafood cuisine.

Armin looks at Eren dead in his eyes. "And uh-- did you know people get fish from it. Some fish that can only grow in saltwater." Armin sits up a little. "Some- some of that stuff is big! I mean I can't even describe it!"

Armin holds his hands at the size of the first and last shark he ever saw. "This big!" he says. "And it tastes so good! An ah! Did you know the- the sand on beaches is different from sand in the deserts?"

Eren arches an eyebrow. "I didn't know there were sands near beaches..."

"There are and there are-- there are shells and--"

"I will erase your memories now, Armin. "

Their spell is broken just like that.

Armin stares at Eren's jade green eyes but he sees a man with a manbun and deep titan marks all over his face.

"I will erase your memories now, Armin." Eren says as he stares into the fake ocean of the paths. "I don't know what Mikasa will choose, but I..."

Armin doesn't remember what happens next, what he does remember however, is that the two of them were hugging, their hands protecting each other's nape of their necks. And Armin resting his forehead on his shoulder.

And it was the moment everything went awry.

Eren was wrong, Mikasa failed to choose. She didn't choose to kill Eren and then- then everyone paid their price for it.

Armin bits his lips. He can't. He can't show those emotions. So he looks away and covers his face with his hands. "You aren't listening, are you?" Armin whispers.

Eren shakes his head. "Nope..." he says, his lips spreading to a smirk.

Armin freezes. he looks at Eren, confused.

"I don't care about the outside world... I care about how dreamy you look when you talk about it. I love that look in your eyes and I want to give that dream to you just to see how your face changes in joy." Eren says, his finger gently pokes his cheek.

Armin feels heat rising to his face.

This is-- this is a horrible idea! Who put Eren so close to me!?

If we... Kill our enemies... Will we finally be free?

All the joy slips from Armin's eyes.

He pushes back and puts some distance between himself and Eren.

That's right. Eren won't even look at him once they reach the ocean. He'll be cold and stoic and thinking of nothing other than killing everyone on the other side of the wall.

He doesn't care about their dream.

He never cared.

STOP! This Eren is different, remember?

"Is it about Annie?"

Her name makes all the problems in Armin's mind disappear when he's reminded of his problems that are growing in numbers.

"You've been very sad since we caught Annie." Eren says. "Are you sad because she's in jail?"

Armin doesn't answer.

Annie has become an open wound that refuses to heal. Armin is torn between cutting off that limb entirely or being patient with it.

Eren sighs. "I feel like I'm gonna regret saying this but why--" Eren grinds his teeth, fists his hands and his eyebrows twitch. "--don't... you... visit Annie's cell?" he says through grit teeth, physically exhausting himself while suggesting it.

Armin blinks in surprise. "Eren are you, uhm... Ok?" he asks. "Did you just... Told me I should see Annie."

"Well, I'm not her biggest fan but--" Eren waves dismissively. "Forget it. I should move in some more boxes. Or I'll check up on Mikasa and see how she's doing... I think I should leave you alone with your thoughts."

Eren is gone before Armin can bring it in himself to stop him.

It takes a lot to get permission to visit Annie.

Commander Erwin is reluctant to give him an unsupervised meeting. In the end, he gives Armin ten minutes and challenges him to make Annie talk.

Armin isn't willing to let this one chance go to waste.

After the heavy door of the dungeon closes behind him, the only sound he can hear is the constant cycle of a ball hitting the wall.

Armin walks down the stairs until he's standing in front of the bars.

It's different from normal cells or ones Armin has been in, it's a strange feeling perse, too dark and too humid.

And Annie is there, in a beige prison uniform, one that Armin has never seen before.

Annie doesn't react to his presence nor does she halt her play with the ball. She throws it and catches it repeatedly without even glancing at Armin's direction.

She doesn't move from her spot on the bed, Armin can see untouched foods piled on one another.

So she hasn't been eaten.

Armin takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry it came to this." he says sincerely, his eyes staying on the ground.

Annie throws the ball at the wall, silent.

She's not going to talk, that much Armin can tell. "Annie, talk to me please," he says. "That's the only way you have out of this cell."

The ball bounces back into her hand.

Annie's eyes are strictly painted at the wall in front of her.

"Silent treatment?" Armin asks.

No answer comes his way.

His tightly controlled patience snaps from his control and he leans forward, too close to bars separating them. Armin grips it as tightly as he could. "I know about Marley." he whispers so that the military police agents couldn't hear him. "I know about the warrior program, I know about your father."

Annie stops the cycle of throwing and catching that ball.

Armin knows he hit the spot.

Annie doesn't throw back the ball but she doesn't answer anything.

Armin decides to keep pushing his luck.

"I know you promised him to return." he says, leaning closer to the cell. "Don't you want to uphold your end of the promise Annie? I bet he's still waiting for you."

THANG.

Annie hits the wall with her fist, it leaves a big print and some of the bricks in the wall fall off the floor.

Again, he hit the spot.

"Talk, Annie. Tell them all about Marley. And I'm sure you'll make the chance of seeing your father again increase splendidly."

If there is one thing Armin knows best is to know the time to leave, to finish a torment. So he leaves, he doesn't look back as the soldiers close the door of the dungeon behind him.

There is a weight on his heart that he knows won't go away this easily. It's been there since he killed Berthold and will be there forever.

Armin is too buried in his thoughts, He almost doesn't see it.

The crack in the wall.

He stops in front of it immediately, he stares at it for a few seconds, too shocked to fathom the fact that the building they're keeping Annie in is potentially not strong enough. The torch burns behind him and provides a small light, but even that is enough to understand there is a deep nothingness between these walls.

He runs to the nearest soldier, "When was this castle built?" Armin asks, hurriedly. "When was the last time it was rebuilt??"

The soldier thinks for a few seconds. "I don't know... I think during the first settlement."

that's almost one hundred years ago.

"Why do you ask, recruit? What's wrong?"

No...

if Annie decides to transform, this castle will crumble to dust by the explosion of her transformation.

and they can't move here anywhere because she refuses to eat anything.

Armin's blood freezes in his veins.

He fists his hands.

how much longer...

how much longer until Annie decides to test her only way out?

It's not everyday that the commanders in the scout in the scout regiment get to meet their predecessor.

Given that most of the time the said predecessor is dead, Erwin isn't shocked about that.

However, he never thought he'd see Keith Shadis again. Not after that day he resigned and left the likes of him and Hange wondering what happened.

But then again, he'd never seen him in the 'welcoming' crowd after expeditions either. But many saw him last time, Erwin should have

expected him.

When there was a knock on his door, he thought Hange might be back with more research papers but instead a horrified soldier told him the commandant was here to see him.

Erwin welcomed him in. Something is up, Shadis isn't the kind to chitchat.

The man walks in, he lacks any hair and the youthful look in his eyes is almost completely gone.

"Commandant Shadish." he says with a nod and points at the seat in front of his chair. "Please sit down, what brings you here."

Shadis doesn't sit down, he stays standing and stares into Erwins. "Curiosity brought me here." is all he says.

"... Curiosity?"

"And a question," he adds. "You're a *special* and talented leader, Erwin. So I was shocked to see this flaw and I'm certainly hoping this bystander saw things wrong."

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean?" Erwin repeats.

"Erwin, your chain of command is too short. I'm just here to ask why?" Keith says, shaking his head. "I have no business in telling you what to do and what not to do, but it's dangerous. You have Miche first, Hange second and that's it."

Erwin slowly lowers the cup. "What do you mean, commandant?" he asks.

Keith narrows his eyes. "I think you know it better than I do, this job is dangerous. And it's highly likely that both Hange and Miche can be kicked out of action at the same time. Also-- you have no one ready to replace them."

Erwin knows that.

Erwin Smith, whose mind runs a thousand thoughts a second knows the greatest weakness to the scout regiment is their lack of suitable leadership. Erwin often wonders if Hange or Miche are suitable replacements after all.

But, the commander can always be replaced, that's what the chain of command is for.

"I understand your concerns, commandant." Erwin says, lacing his hands in front of him. "And we did have quite the number of recruits this year. Which do you suggest to look out for?"

Keith arches an eyebrow. "From recruits?"

don't you have veterans to choose from?

The question hangs in the air. Erwin doesn't answer it and lets the air thicken until Keith can guess it himself.

"It's your regiment, Erwin."

Shadis turns around to leave and then stops suddenly, he looks back at Erwin from the corner of his eyes. "You can choose what you see fit, but hear it from a former scouts commander, I've noticed this short line of command will cause you problems someday. Now treat it however you may. After all, you haven't chosen anyone from the past five generations anywear near the chain of command. That's why it getting shorter and shorter."

Shadish huffs and turns to leave but then Erwins sudden voice stops him. "Commandant... Why were you in the welcoming crowd this time when you never were in the past five years?"

Shadish frowns.

He doesn't answer, the only sound that follows him as he leaves is the distant sound of his footsteps

Erwin sits on his office table. what he was working on before Shadis arrived slips from his mind, to never return.

He hates to admit it, but shadis is right.

No matter how much he just wants to sacrifice every resource he has to an end, the scout regiment is a torch he needs to pass on.

But who?

Everyone whom he ever considered for the role, with Miche and Hange being the obvious exceptions, died or was brutally injured in Erwins hungry conquest for the truth. That leaves him with just the new recruits and--

Erwin presses his lips to a thin line. His eyes fall on the files of the two renegades he met earlier. The two had successfully taken the female titan in custody without sacrificing any of their friends. Although this shows nothing of their capability in surviving an encounter with a pure titan, it is still remarkable enough for Erwin.

Erwin opens Armin Arlert and Jean Kirstein's folders.

He sends a soldier to fetch Miche and Hange. He needs their opinion on this matter.

Armin was called to Erwin's office that morning.

He is waiting for his punishment and isn't surprised to see Jean there too. He was waiting near Erwin's office with his arms crossed and playing with the handle of his ODM gear. "Do you know why they called us here for?" Jean asks the moment Armin gets close.

Armin shrugs. Even after all this time, there is very little he knows about Erwin Smith's mindset. All he knows is that he has to keep commander Erwin alive at all costs. He is the only person capable enough to lead paradise when the news of Marley breaks out.

Armin swallows hard, he opens his collar button to make it easier for him to breathe the hot summer air. "I honestly have no clue," he says. "But... I guess it'll be fine. We haven't done anything too bad, right?"

Jean clicked his tongue. "Every mistake I've ever made is currently in my head. I have no idea which one I'm being held responsible for, honestly." he hums.

Jean hums.

"Your eyes look like they're planning for something," he says. "I know that look in your purple pupils."

Armin unconsciously touches under His eyes. "It's still strange to be referred to as having Purple eyes." he says outloud.

"You missed the point. What is your big brain thinking about?"

Armin wets his lips. "I visited Annie and..." he sighs. "If she decides to transform one day-- the building will eventually give in. I don't think it's strong enough to hold her in?"

Jean huffs. "Give me a break. That really isn't in my field any way." he sighs. "What's in your mind?"

"Something I'm going to regret. But it'll buy us some time." he says. "The more I think about it, the more it makes sense." Armin whispers.

"What makes sense?"

"What should I do? What is logical and kind at the same time... And also..."

also gives Annie the chance to pull herself out of this mess.

Jean doesn't have the chance to question him further because the soldier guarding the door nods at the two of them. "The commander

will be seeing you now." he says and opens the door.

Armin lets Jean go in first. Jean reluctantly walks in and salutes, Armin follows him closely behind. Erwin is sitting behind his office table and both of their files are open in front of him. Hange and Miche have unreadable expressions on their eyes.

But something about Hanges state is calming, familiar. Armin lets himself hope this will turn out good enough.

"I'm sure you're curious about what will happen now." Erwin asks.

They both nod.

"You have potential, and it's a potential that I don't want it to go to waste, but harbored and used." Erwin says. He stands up and goes away from their view so Jean and Armin can see Miche and Hange better. "From now, you'll be assigned new squads. We've assigned you to superiors that you have more in common according to your most promising strength, or weaknesses that you need to work on." Erwin orders, Miche and Hange stand behind him silently. Armin has never seen Hange so thoughtful.

Erwin looked at the two of them. "Jean, you will be working with me while Officially you, Sasha Braus and Connie Springle will join section commander Miche's squad. Armin, you will be training with section commander Hange and staying with their squad along with Mikasa Ackerman and Eren Yeager. And both of you will have to work with Miche on your survival methods."

Erwin walks closer to them. "I want to see what the two of you are really capable of if you survive long enough." he says in the last part as a warning. Then, commander Erwin's eyes focus solely on Jean. "So, tell me, how did you manage to convince your friends to come After you in this reckless mission."

Jean opens his mouth to say something but he fails to form words the first time he tries. He shakes his head and tries again. "It-It's a

long story, commander Erwin."

"Good, because we have time."

"Ah, Erwin you and your questions!" Hange laughs. They jump and grab Armin's shoulder. "Come on! I need to know you better, as your section commander, you should really introduce me to your friends too!" Armin doesn't have time to react as they throw a hand over his shoulder and push him out of Erwin's room. "You need to tell me so much! Start by telling me how you made a titan friend!"

Armin sees Jean from the corner of his eyes one moment before Miche closes the door. "Don't go too hard on the kid!" he warns loudly.

Hange grins. "This is my apprentice now! You have your own!" they say loudly. "Now come on, Armin-darling. I have lots to ask you!"

Armin doesn't bother resisting.

Hange's office is just as Armin remembers it to be before Moblit's death, cozy, clean and comfortable. With just enough sunlight peeking in from the curtains to let everyone know what time of the day it is. Their office table however, is full of plans and reports and their library is full of different piles of books.

Armin sits down on one of the chairs and Hange sits in front of him. "So, since you're probably going to spend a lot of time with me, I should introduce myself properly! I'm Zoe Hange, the second section in the survey corps and the only titanologist of the walls."

Armin clears his throat. "I'm-I'm Armin Arlert. From uh- Shiganshina." he says.

"You've got me very curious Armin, how did you stumble upon Eren and his powers, did he have them since birth?" they ask, leaning forward and resting their elbows on their knees. "Is it a power that can be bred into the next generation, I wonder?"

Armin shakes his head immediately. "No-No-" he yells. "He's had insane healing from his titan powers very recently. Just from before cadet days. I would have known if he was a titan since birth because I knew him since we were toddlers!"

Hange rubs their chin. "Hm, I see. And why did you hide his titan?"

Armin shakes his head. "I was... I was afraid of what might happen if the others knew." he admits. "We were just three cadets, with no backup. I told him to keep it a secret and convinced him not to tell anyone, not even his mom."

"Eren ate you." They remind him.

Armin fists his hands on his thighs, he certainly doesn't want to remember how a titans stomach looked like.

Hot,

Damp,

With that red greasy liquid.

"Eren was acting out of instinct. In the end, I'm all safe and sound and whole." Armin says. "He probably knew it wouldn't harm me."

Hange hums. "Well, Well, Well." Hange waves their hand in the air. "You did lie to the court."

Armin nods. "Survival makes me act stupid sometimes." he admits. Armin smiles softly then. "Section commander... I'm actually interested in your research. I've heard alot about you."

Hange tilts their head. "About me?" they whisper.

"Yes, I've heard about the nets you have invented to catch titans alive." Armin rambles on. "About your research on titan anatomy and their other weaknesses."

Hange's eyes sparkle. "Wow! Erwin did a good choice putting you up with me! How much do you want to hear, Armin?"

Armin's lips spread to a smile. "As much as I can, section commander. After all, direct attacks have been proven not to work well in front of titans. Also, Knowledge is--"

"POWER!" Hange interrupts. "Sit comfortably, Armin, I'm going to tell you all about what I've done and all I'm planning to do to your friend, Eren!"

The last part alarms Armin but he doesn't say anything.

Hange leans a little closer. "Ok, my research started when I first encountered a titan. I kicked it out of hatred and it weighs almost nothing--"

"--And that concludes All that I've learnt about titans!" Hange says finally, their cheerful eyes look at Armin, who is moments away from passing out from exhaustion. "With Sawney and Bean, I could have learnt more but..."

Hange sighs.

"Some things can not be changed, I'm afraid. Humans' fear of the unknown is one of them." they say, waving their hand in the air. "So, any ideas? Any comments? We'd like to hear your ideas! Right Moblit!?"

Moblit, who had appeared somewhat in the middle of their talk, tries not to fall asleep. His eyes suddenly open wide. "Yes, section commander!" he says, a little too loudly.

Armin hums. "I uh... I was just thinking about this new hardening ability. Have you ever seen it in any other titan?"

Hange rubs their chin. "Well, well, some titans have had some extra hard teeth in the past but-- none that reached the female or the armored titans levels." Hange whispers.

"I think we will come across them again." Armin points out. "We need something that will explode their armored like a gun or--"

Hange hits their fist against their palm. "You're right! We should improve our weaponry! Our blades are already sharp beyond understanding so we need something-" a wicked smile spreads across their face "-that goes BOOM!"

Hange suddenly stands up, slamming their hands on the table. "That's it!! That's it!! A gun against titans! A titan gun! Gun-titan!" they kept shouting. "Moblit! Get me the head of engineers!"

Moblits eyebrows twitch. "Not again, Section commander!"

"It was nice talking to you!" Hange pinches Armin's cheek and turns to Moblit. "To my lab Moblit!"

Armin's face feels hot from the place Hange pinched it. "You're dismissed, dear Armin, be in my office tomorrow 8 am sharp!"

Hange runs out of the office and disappears from Armin's view.

The next thing he hears is Hanges enthusiastic voice. "Pull the lever, moblit!"

And then--

"Wrong lever Moblit!"

"Remind me again why we're here?" Eren asks as they walk down the streets of Trost with Mikasa.

Mikasa holds a small bouquet of flowers in her hand. "Because Mother says so." She reminds him. "She probably wants to see us."

Eren clicks his tongue. "Ok, let me ask it this way," he stops. "Why did they allow us out? I thought we were confined because of the stunt we pulled with Annie."

Mikasa shrugs. "I don't know. Don't you want to see your mother?"

Eren sighs. "Yeah I do..." he says, too quietly. "Let's just go to her new house. We haven't seen it yet since it was rebuilt."

Their walk to her small home in the south of Trost is one done in relative silence. Eren looks at the address more than once to make sure they are going the right way. He has half a mind to visit Armin's grandpa as well, to see how he's doing in the restaurant, but he stretches the idea.

Soon, Mikasa and Eren are standing in front of a door at the end of a dead end and leaning against the outer wall. "Hmm, it should be here." Mikasa whispers. "I'll knock."

Eren shrugs. "Suit yourself." he mumbles.

Mikasa knocks the door with the back of her hand twice. It takes a few minutes to get a response when the door opens.

And standing there, is Keith Shadis, in civilian clothes and lacking the distinctive frown and haunted eyes he always had in the training ground.

Eren arches an eyebrow. "Oh, sorry commandant, I think we are at the wrong address--" but Eren can't finish his words because Carla immediately jumps at the door.

"Keith, I told you I'd open the door myself!" she yells and runs to the door. "Mikasa! Eren! Welcome! Please come in."

Eren and Mikasa exchange a look. Mikasa is much better at hiding his bewilderment than Eren is. She walks inside with a tight smile

and gives the flowers to Carla with a sweet sentence Eren can't quite hear.

Eren's eyes are glued at the commandant and why... For the first time... He looks *nervous* . With his hands tightly behind his back and his eyes looking anywhere but Eren and Mikasa's eyes.

Eren found out Shadis and his mother used to know each other back in shiganshina but... Did they knew each other so well.

Eren flinches and shakes the thought.

Carla smiles at the two of them. "Please come in! The dinner will be ready soon! So, I think we should talk a little before it does."

Her mother leads them into her new house and it is indeed a nice home. Eren would call it charming if it wasn't for commandant Shadis's silent existence.

Eren and Mikasa sit down on a blue sofa. The only sound in the living room is the creaking of the floor and sofa as they sit down. Carla puts the flowers in a vase and joins them With a four cups of tea.

Carla smiles at the two of them, "so, Eren, Mikasa, how is everything?" she says as she gives each person their cup of tea.

"Not bad." Eren says, his lips tightly pressed to a thin line. "Armin's been busy these days. We're just training."

Carla hums and nods. Before she can ask another question to deliberately soften the mood, Mikasa opens her mouth to speak. "Not to be rude, commandant, but what are you doing in my mother's house?"

Those words leave Mikasa's mouth and shatters the silence.

Eren crosses his arms over his chest. "Yeah, I'd like to know too."

To calm himself down, Eren takes his cup of tea and sips it quietly.

"Kids, I don't know how to tell you this..." Carla says, her hand takes Keiths. "So I'll just say it."

Carla takes a deep breath, then gives them that reaches her eyes. "Keith and I are getting married." she says, loudly.

Eren spits out the tea.

"WHAT!?!"

Mikasa blinks in surprise, looking from Carla to Shadis and then back at Carla.

Eren's jaw falls open. "Tell me I heard it wrong!" he pleads at Mikasa.

She slowly shakes her head.

Annie made a mistake.

She knew not eating will eventually lead to exhaustion, but she couldn't trust any of the food they gave her. Her titan allowed her to go long durations without nutritions, those scientists in Marley made a record of three weeks.

However, back in those days, she was used to starvation.

She knew she was moved. The earth under her feels different, if it can be called floor at all. She keeps her eyes closed and tries to maintain herself, she needs to gather as much information as she can before she wakes up.

"Ah, you're awake..."

That's Armin's voice.

That means there is no point in pretending anymore.

"Don't worry, we're alone in the open." he says, he steps away from her.

Annie opens her eyes and is shocked to see the sky above her head. She sits up and immediately recognises the texture of the great walls.

She looks around to ask her questions but Armin just smiles at her. "Rise and shine, it's almost midnight." he says.

Armin is in his ODM and a black cloak. He holds a paper bag and smiles nonchalantly.

Annie rubs her sore eyes, angrily. "You knocked me out again!" she growls.

Armin holds both of his hands up. "Sorry, there was no other way to get you out without a fuss." he says. His eyes drift to the view beyond the walls. "It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" he whispers. "Before you ask, we're between Krolva and Trost. A desolate place, no one can find us here. Don't worry."

Annie blinks in surprise.

It's true, inside the walls, there is nothing but a jungle and some distant lights coming from north.

"Distant huh? Aren't you afraid that I'll kill you?" She snaps, standing to her feet. "I can--" she says, scratching her palm until it bruises. It starts to bleed and the blood overflows and falls on the ground. "--crush you under my heel without a second thought."

Armin's lip pulled into a smirk. "You won't kill me. No, not in a way that'll truly matter in the long run." he says. "Ah, by the way--"

Armin pulls her belongings out from that bag "Here, I could sneak one out." Armin says, giving her favorite hoodie back to her, neatly folded in his hands. On top of it there is a plastic bag packed by his

grandfather the night before. "And don't worry, the donut isn't poisoned."

Annie takes the hoodie and wears it. She won't admit it outloud but she hates that prison clothes. Their beige color makes her want to poke. And the familiar texture of the hoodie makes her relax a little.

She shoves the donut into her pocket. "You can't expect me to believe that." she says, an angry frown set in place.

"And you couldn't expect me to just trust you after you almost killed my friends, Annie." Armin retorts. "The donut is my grandfather's gift. I wouldn't poison that!"

Armin kicks a nearby pebble, it rolls and falls off the walls. "I understand you, Annie. But apparently, understanding each other isn't enough when both our actions are lead by people we can't control."

Annie looks at the horizon, the moon is almost full, just a nail short of it.

Marley will be in the port waiting for them tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, just like they've always had during full moons.

But there is one question that is bugging her mind. "Why are you doing this? what can you possibly get from doing me this favor?" Annie asks him, seriously.

Armin's face doesn't change. "Why did you save me that day?" Armin asks.

"Idiocy." Annie yells. She pulls up her hoodie to cover her hair and her face. "Don't worry, it won't happen again. Now answer me before I change my mind about letting you live."

Armin slowly closes his eyes.

"Closure." he says simply, opening his eyes and staring one hundred yards ahead.

Annie blinks in surprise.

Armin faces her. "I mean, what better than the privilege of a goodbye and parting gifts?"

Armin hums thoughtfully. If he closes his eyes he can picture Annie's death as if it happened yesterday. But no, he won't sit here and let it happen again. Even if it means letting her go like this. So Armin forces a smile on his lips and meets her eyes. "If you run tonight and the next, you'll reach the port at the night of the full moon. Marley is waiting for you there, am I right?" he asks.

Annie nods curtly. "How do you know so many details--"

Armin puts a finger on his lips. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret. And don't get me wrong. I *am* going to regret this." Armin says, somewhat confidently. "One way or another this is going to blow up in my face."

Annie chuckles. "At least you know that."

"But I wasn't lying, Annie. I do understand where you're coming from." Armin puts his hand over his heart. "If this was the only way to save my grandpa, I would have taken it without hesitation, too."

"I don't need your pity."

"No, you don't, what you do need is an excuse to get out of this island." Armin says, shoving his hands into his pockets. "And now you have it. That prison costume is enough proof on its own."

"If I ever see you again, we'll most likely be on opposite sides." Armin presses his mouth to a thin line, his eyes looking directly at Annie's. "I won't choose Eren, Mikasa and my grandpas well-being over yours, Annie." he adds, just to make it crystal clear.

A rare smirk appears on Annie's lips. "Without your head start, you had no way of defeating me. Now that I know what you hide under your sleeve, you're in no position to give threats, Armin." she answers back. "Next time we see each other in battlefield, consider yourself dead."

"I know."

Armin licks his lips with a sigh, he looks away and stares at the beautiful view of the stars and the jungle below them. Armin smiles bitterly. What a depressing atmosphere it is. "I think the only thing we can give each other right now is a meaningful goodbye." he murmurs. "The best parting gift for me is to watch you leave my life peacefully. No bloodshed. No arguments. No death. Just us, the moon, and a meaningful goodbye."

Armin takes a deep breath.

I didn't even get to do this last time.

Annie pulls her hoodie on her head. "For your sake and mine, Armin, I hope we never meet each other again." she says finally.

Armin looks ahead, his heart burning with emotions he couldn't quite name. "Likewise, Annie."

Annie doesn't jump immediately.

She stops and looks back at the corner of her eyes. Armin can't bring himself to smile, not even bitterly.

In the lieu of any words, Annie pulls her hoodie closer and covers her face.

She jumps.

The explosion from her transformation shakes the earth but her steps are as silent as a mouse when she runs south.

Armin walks towards the edge of the walls, he watches her run.

Run.

Run and run.

The wind blows past Armin's face. His chin length hair dances in the chilling breeze.

He watches Annie's titan run away until it's nothing but a dot in the horizon.

Armin waves slowly, the other hand buried in his pocket.

"Goodbye, Annie."

(1) Arthur Conan Doyle, The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes

Poor Eren XD

Also, I think Annie thing was a little unclear. Armin let her go because if she had escaped, they couldn't fight her off. But this way, she will be gone for a while, enough for them to make thunder spears or something. So basically Armin bought time for them by freeing Annie.

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Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

What makes you think you are above us?

Chapter 10: What makes you think you are above us?

Erwin, Levi and Hange are not happy about the disappearance of the female titan.

Zeke attacks three weeks late and Armin can't do anything other than sit back and watch as he wreaks havoc.

Sorry for being late! But here is a chapter I wrote under 35 degree heat!

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

Some blood, injury, humans being eaten.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Jean hasn't seen much tragedy in his life.

Sometimes, he hopes he could have kept it that way.

Often, when he's alone in the dark and quiet of the room he shares with Connie, he thinks why didn't he join the MPs with Marco? They could have been in a bar right now, blissfully ignorant of titans and titans shifters and humanoid monsters.

Now however, the notion is more clear than ever.

He stands in Annie's previous jail cell. It's empty and dreadfully clean, no sign of blood or resistance or steam.

It's as if-- Annie simply bent the bars and walked away.

Jean stares at the literally bent bars in front of him while the rest of Erwin's elite look around the room for any signs they could find to follow Annie.

Annie, a titan shifter that can be wreaking havoc somewhere just as they speak.

They gave the news to commander Erwin a few hours ago and it was just Jean's luck that he was with the commander at the time. Erwin had ordered that no one else should be informed about this.

"This is strange..." Jean whispers, his gloved hand runs over the smooth but cruelly bent prison bar. "Annie was strong but she wasn't... She wasn't this strong."

Erwin leans closer, "she was a titan shifter, what makes you think she was incapable of doing this?" he asks.

Jean grinds his teeth. He doesn't have any reason that'll convince the commander other than it's his *gut feeling*.

And a logical man such as Erwin Smith will simply not believe it.

Jean shakes his head instead.

He can't prove it, but he can feel that this isn't the way Annie escaped.

"The answer you're looking for is that there are no hand shaped prints on the bars." Erwin says, without taking his eyes off of the bars. "If the woman was strong enough to bend the bars, it would leave hand prints. Here however, it's smooth. Someone probably used a jack or a machine to do this."

Jean blinks in surprise.

"That's... That means..."

"She has had help. There is another insider, probably the armored." Erwin whispers. He turn to one of the soldiers. "Alert Section commander Miche. I need to have a word with him."

Jean's eyes fall to the ground.

there is another traitor.

someone They know, someone they trust has freed Annie.

Something on the ground, next to Annie's half eaten lunch, takes Jean's attention. It sparkles and shines in the brim light of the torches but Jean recognises it immediately.

Sugar .

Jean kneels down and takes some of the white powder on the ground between his fingers.

However.

this sugar...

"It's... It's that thing..." Jean whispers, he plays with the white crystals between his fingers again, shocked to his core. "It's the crystal Armin- Armin poisoned Annie with."

And the only person who had access to this crystal was...

Was Armin himself.

Jean fists his hands. *so, Armin, it was you. But why would you jail Annie just to sneak her out?*

Jean looks back at the rest of the soldiers to make sure they won't see his discovery. Jean needs to listen to Armin's explanation before he reports him to the higher up.

That's what he plans at least.

Two heavy hands land on his shoulder and keep him strictly in place. Jean's breath catches in his throat because why is commander Erwin so near??

Erwin smiles. That means he sees the powder too.

"Good observations, Jean," the commander says. "But I'm afraid it's not enough to put Arlert in suspicion."

Jean shuts his eyes.

There is a reason why this man is the commander. No one can slip anything from under his eyes.

Jean shakes his head. "Armin... Armin was the one who captured her. Why would he sneak her out?" he thinks out loud. "This is wrong... Should be wrong."

Erwin hums. "It might be. But evidence is evidence."

Erwin stands up and clears his throat. "I will order Miche squad to keep the 104th isolated until further notice. As not to arouse suspicions, your friends will be among them too."

Jean blinks in surprise. "Oh... Very well, commander."

"But you'll stay with me for now." Erwin says finally. "Let's see what else we can from this room..."

Armin never had enough time to get to know the allegedly second strongest soldier of humanity. In the other timeline, he died long

before Armin could get to a high enough rank in the veterans to get to meet him.

However, he notices he has dodged a *bullet* .

"So this is how the Miche squad keeps in shape??" he whispers, too stunned to speak loudly.

Jean, Sasha and Connie are in no good shape. All three of them are steaming from head to toe and covered in quickly vanishing titan blood.

They are on the exterior of wall Sina, right above Krolva where is new gate their start their expeditions from.

Armin looks behind the three to see Miche and the rest of his squad talking, all of them have somewhat smiles on their faces other than Miche himself.

Jean ignores Armin for a moment to just sit down. "Yeah," he sighs. "I wouldn't have accepted the Miche squad if I knew this is how they trained."

Connie wipes some of the titan blood from his forehead. "This is nuts, man!" he whisper-yells, "he just sent the three of us down there to 'enhance our firsthand experience with titans' and Jean almost got his hands bitten off!"

Sasha looks back, a horrified look in her eyes. "They cleared the area other than three titans and sent us down there." she blinks in surprise. "Not to- not to--- how are we ever going in this freaking squad who kills titans for breakfast!"

Armin smiles bitterly. *Even this squad is nothing but titan food without the proper equipment.*

Jean hisses under his teeth as he rolls his right sleeve up. Armin's eyes widened, they weren't joking. They were titan tooth prints

around his elbow, neither of them was bleeding but it looked painful from the way Jean's face had been screwed.

"Oi, Jean, don't play with that wound." Connie yells and kneels down. He takes out a bandage from his ODM gears storage and slowly wraps it around Jean's forearm.

Sasha shakes her head. "You dodged a bullet, Armin! The area is clear or I bet he'd send you down there too!"

"Oho! Is that Arlert!?" a man, Armin will later learn his name as gelgar, waves his hand. "Why were you so late?"

Miche sighs loudly. So he's been ignoring him since he arrived. Neither of them dare to move as Miche steps near them until he's towering over Armin with his near 2 meter height. "Arlert. You're late." Miche says. "Where have you been?"

Armin immediately salutes. "Sorry, sir! I was with Hange Squad sir!"

"Didn't Erwin tell you that you should train with us too?"

"Yes, but, even now, commander Hange still wouldn't let me go so I had to sneak out." Armin confesses. "I apologize, sir."

Miche suddenly sniffs the air. "I think Moblit used the time you were gone to force Hange to bathe." he says as a matter of fact.

Armin raises an eyebrow. "Uhm. Excuse me sir?"

Miche waves his dismissively. "They're near. Too near, really. Brace yourself."

Before Armin can ask what Miche means, a loud zipping sound of ODM gear fills the air and Hange lands on their feet.

And to the group's shock, their hair is no longer greasy.

Not for now.

"Aruuuuumiiiiin."

Armin freezes for a moment before Hange suddenly hits his back. "Well well, how is our body Miche training you guys? He's not too harsh is he?"

"I was late to training but--" Armin looks at Connie and Sasha. Hange laughs and hits Armin's back again. "Haha! That's our Miche! Hey, Can I borrow back my apprentice, Miche?"

Miche nods. "Gelgar, take the kids back to base with the others."

Hange smiles. "Good to find you Armin, do you remember the gas you proposed to use in our rockets?" they say, walking away south on the wall.

Armin waves at Jean, Sasha and Connie as they jump and follow Gelgar, then he runs to catch up with Hange. "Ye-Yes section commander. The *rockets* will probably be easier to handle if its similar to our ODM gears maneuvering."

Hange rubs their chin. "Well, I told Niffa to make a prototype on her own. She did pretty well and now we have a test subject we can work on." they declare. "Come here, Armin-- we need to move!"

Hange doesn't wait for Armin to follow them. They jump back on their horse and Armin has to rush after them.

The first thing that catches their eyes when they reach the scouts headquarter, is Mikasa training with dummies far too small to be considered titans.

And barehanded.

Armin had to stop and stare at her. Sweat rolled down her face and her hands were shaking as they struck the dummy. But she didn't stop, her teeth grit harshly and her eyes screaming murder.

"Does she ever stop training?" Hange asks Armin to go inside.

Now that Armin thinks about it, maybe pairing up the likes of Mikasa and Eren with Hange Squad, a squad made for gathering information not fighting titans, is a bad idea.

As Eren recalled once last night, Even Hange Squads fighting style is drastically different from Levi squads. Hange is more on evading and observation while Levis was striking and killing.

But Eren is chatting with Niffa and the other two men in the squad while Mikasa is training alone.

It's a fragile peace but a peace nonetheless.

"Follow me, Armin!" Hange says, snapping Armin's attention back to them.

Hange leads him to the backyard, where it's all empty other than one shooting target in the middle of the grass grounds. Hange stops and puts their hand on their hips. A few seconds later, Moblit appears with a cylinder wrapped in a piece of parchment. He takes a deep breath as he gives it to Hange, mentally preparing himself.

Hange's grin grows as they take it into their hands.

Armin can control his curiosity or the hope rising to his chest.

"What's this?"

"This is our rocket--"

Hange lets the parchment fall to the ground. Armin's smile wipes from his face. This pipe is too big to be carried by hand and looks more like a canon than a thunder spear.

They hold it up and point it at Armin. "-- it's the latest invention of us and the corp of engineering. It still needs a name and an actual working explosion buuuut...."

Hange throws the pipe to Armin.

Armin gasps and he takes the probably first ever model of the thunder spears and holds it with care. Has commander Hange gone mad? A thunder spear shouldn't be tossed around like that if--

Moblit takes a deep breath. "See, Section commander? Even your apprentice understands how dangerous that thing is!!"

Armin tries to shake the fear from his face.

Hange breaks into laughter. They wipe a tear from their eyes. "Relax! Armin!" they laugh, "it's just a prototype!"

Hange stands next to Armin while humming a rhythm He had never heard before. Then they take the pipe from Armin's hand and inspect it again. "It has to go a long way to be actually used in battle..."

Armin nods.

"But if we do-- we can reduce our efforts in killing titans to a minimum." Armin concludes. "It's actually much worth it in my opinion."

Hange's grin reaches their eyes.

This morning, Armin, Niffa and Eren were charged with testing three new prototypes of 'rockets' as Hange put it.

Since Eren had an infinite supply of arms, he volunteered to test them out. In the open, between long trees and a few untouched targets to aim at.

Eren lost his left arm three times out of six prototypes he tested. With each time, it took more time to heal, last time Eren had to take a break because his left hand took three hours to heal back.

"I'm ready." Eren says the moment his hands stop steaming. Armin counts the fingers on each hand and sighs.

"You need to rest." he points in, he grabs Eren's elbow before he can reach out for the last thunder spear on the set. "Eren." he repeats, a bit of threat in his tone.

Eren smiles, he doesn't break Armin's grip. "What happens if I do rest? Armin, I'm a titan it's not like any of this is--"

Eren coughs up, he immediately covers his mouth and nose with free hand but that's not enough, Armin can see the blood between his fingers that's oozing out of his nose.

"Eren--"

"I'm ok." Eren snaps. He pulls his hand back and reaches for a piece of parchment in his pocket and that's when Armin realizes the handkerchief is stained with blood.

Armin looks at Eren with horror. "This isn't the first time... Is it Eren?"

Eren doesn't answer, he wipes the blood from his face and breathes out slowly. "No." he tucks the handkerchief back in his pocket and puts his back to Armin. "It's been a while."

Armin runs his hand through his hair. "Eren--" he yells, pulling his hair out of his scalp. "Why didn't you tell me this before??"

Eren arches an eyebrow. "It happens every time. It's not like I have much control over the monster!" he whispers back. "Now, if you'll excuse me--"

"We have to wait until Nifa comes back." Armin lies, he stares at Eren's jade eyes as he does so. "She probably wants to see the last prototype."

Eren arches an eyebrow, his hand freezes above the last thunder spear prototype. "But she left the last three to you--"

"Well, I think she'd want to see the last one." Armin argues back.

He shuts his eyes tightly and crosses his arms over his chest. "The test is on hold until she comes back," he declares.

or you heal.

Eren, ever so persistent, sits down on the burnt grass and looks back. He doesn't meet Armin's eyes and makes no noise. Completely silent.

A moment of silence is all it takes for Armin to yield. He sits down too and his mind immediately looks around for a subject to shatter this awkward silence, his eyes fall somewhere in the distance and he remembers how hard Mikasa has been training recently.

Armin licks his lips, he stares at the back of Eren's head for a moment before he finally says: "Mikasa has been training for days now... And why was she... Training with human sized dolls?"

Eren clicks his tongue. "Let her be." he murmurs. "I'm just glad she isn't practicing on the real thing."

Armin blinks in surprise. "... Real thing?"

Eren rolls his eyes. "Just let her be."

Armin looks at him from the corner of his eye. "Hey... Is there something I don't know about?"

Eren's eyebrows twitch. "Yeah..."

"And I suppose that's what got Mikasa and you so worked up?"

Eren scufs, offended. "Please-- I'm not worked up. Mikasa is. I won't deny that. But I'm not. Mom deserves happiness and it's not like it's a bad thing." Eren shakes his head. "Oh, Fine--"

"There you are, boys!"

Nifa's gentle voice breaks their spell. They slowly turn around. She stands a few feet back, her hand on her hip and smiling at them. "Are you alright, Eren? We can test the rest another time, you know?"

Eren stands up immediately. "No, I'm alright." he says.

Armin doesn't stop him as he picks up the thunder spear this time.

Eren stands on his spot, ten meters away from his aim. Eren waits until Armin and Nifa are safely hidden behind the brick wall they've made. Nifa puts his thumb up.

Eren takes a deep breath.

He throws the thunder spear, it doesn't deploy right.

It explodes midair and Eren is thrown back.

Eren sits back up with a curse.

Armin runs out of the hiding spot. He almost gasps and kneels down. His hands hesitate to touch Eren's battered state. Eren's left hand is intact, a bit broken and bent in odd shapes. Other than that, his body is covered with small scraps and bruises.

"Ow. Ow. Ow." Eren shouts as he tries to move it. Armin puts a gentle hand on his shoulder to stop him but Eren yells again. "Sorry! Sorry!"

Nifa appears behind him. She shakes her head. "You shouldn't move. I'll get a medic." she says. "Come on, don't move a muscle."

Armin swallows down the guilt he feels crawling up to his body.

He notices the same fact Nifa does.

Eren's body isn't steaming.

Armin is not an engineer.

However, his biggest wish right now is to finish the thunder spears. The relief itself will be something to celebrate for days.

Because after six times of having his hand blown off, it's no longer regenerating. His hand was casted tied up because his titan healing wasn't working either.

So Armin writes whatever he remembers about thunder spears with all details he can force his mind to remember and hugs all the papers as he runs to Hange's office.

His hand is above the door handle when he is forced to stop.

"WHA-AT!?!"

That's commander Hange inside, there comes another sudden sound of books being knocked over the ground.

"Keep it down, Hange. The boy might hear." Levi snaps. "Erwin suspects it might be him. He's just taking the necessary precautions."

Armin's eyes widened.

His hand above the door handle starts to shake.

"... We need to keep it down." Levi hisses. "That boys a ticking bomb."

"But he's an *intelligent* ticking bomb!" Hange answers back. "If it wasn't for the material he proposed, this stuff would have taken centuries to make!"

A sound of metal hitting wood comes from the other side of the door.

"Either way, he and his friends are as much suspects of having the armored and other goddamn titans as the rest of the 104th. I'm

sending them under Miche." Levi says. "Erwins orders. While my squad and I will be looking for any signs from the female titan. Hange squad should stay in the interior."

Hange sighs loudly.

Armin immediately steps back. His heart keeps beating rapidly in his chest.

what have you done??

He steps back and walks away, his steps keep getting speed until he's running down the stairs.

His hammering heart stops only when he's outside and the morning sun shines on his eyes.

The papers have fallen from Armin's hands and he doesn't know where he lost them. He grips his head and forces his breathing to even.

Inhale....

One... Two... Three... Four...

Hold it.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Hold it.

Exhale.

Armin's hands fall to his sides.

That's it. The veterans are suspecting him. For what or for whom, Armin doesn't know. What he knows for sure is that any plan he

could have come up with to protect the scouts from Zeke's sneak attack will no longer work.

Even now...

Armin stands tall, he looks at the horizon and the morning sun that shone lazily over the glass.

Zeke was supposed to attack three weeks ago.

Armin stares out at the window.

no, he will attack soon. Maybe when I sent Annie it somehow delayed it.

Armin bites his lips.

The reason for Zeke Yeagers delay is the least of his worries.

They had to cover Eren's hand with bandages because his titan powers didn't heal him. Eren lacks a left hand from elbow down and Armin's makeshift cast does a poor job at concealing that fact.

They don't need the other cadets to see Eren's hand is missing. They don't know Eren is a titan shifter after all.

It has been one day and three hours since his injury and his hand is hanging from his head and no sign of steaming or abnormal healing could be seen.

Armin has been watching it all the way since the moment they started riding towards the headquarters. They were given no reason as to why they were being moved back with the cadets but neither of them protested.

For once, there was a silence between the three that neither bothered to break. It lasted until they were in the castle where the rest of the recruits were kept.

And it still lasts now, that they are in the dining halls.

Armin's eyes move between Mikasa and Eren. The both are fixated on their own food. If Armin was any less observant, he would have brushed it off. But both are showing strange signs.

Mikasa's anger.

Eren's lack of healing.

Or the way the table cracks under Mikasa's hands.

Armin sighs loudly. He drops his spoon and fork into his stew and leans forward. "Is there anything you two need to tell me?"

"No."

"Nope."

They say at the same time.

That only heightens Armin's suspicions.

He hums, he directs his glare at Eren, who just got angrier. The brunette rolls his eyes and looks at Mikasa from the corner of his eyes. "We might as well tell him, him and his grandpa are probably invited to the wedding." Eren growls, playing with the cast around his hand and neck.

Armin arches an eyebrow. "Wedding?" he asks. What wedding can they possibly be invited to?

Mikasa grinds her teeth. "Don't remind me."

"It'll happen no matter how angry we are." Eren reminds her again. "Mom... Mom deserves to be happy."

Armin blinks in surprise. "Miss Carla?!"

Mikasa glares at him. "Look me in the eyes and tell me someone can be happy with *Shadis* of all people." she whisper-yells.

"Wait a minute, Miss Carla and--" Armin tries to hide the disgust in his tone. "--Commandant Shadis?"

Of course.

Of course.

Armin wants to laugh. "That's... That's not a funny joke." he whispers.

"How I wished it was a joke." Mikasa growls. "With Shadis?? *Shadis* ???"

Eren puts a hand on her shoulder. "Calm down, Mikasa..."

"How can I?"

Eren shakes his head. "Mikasa... I'm not exactly thrilled that Shadis of all people is going to be our step-father.... It's not like we can stop it." he sighs. "Let's just let mom have some peace at least."

Mikasa opened her mouth to say something but a certain eavesdropping recruit beat him to it.

Ymir steps closer, with Krista in toe. "Did I just hear that right? Is Shadis marrying your mom?" Ymir barks a laugh. "Oh, dear lord--"

"Ymir- It's perfectly ok for the-the commandant to find love." Krista says, trying to put up her lovely personality. "Con-Congratulations Eren."

Eren rolls his eyes. "It's nothing to be happy about. guys can you keep it low? We don't want the entire regiment to know--"

"Have you heard it!! SHADIS IS MARRYING YEAGERS MOM-" one of the recruits shouts.

Eren wants to cut his eyes out.

"Sorry, Yeager. It appears the rumor has already spread like wildfire..." Ymir laughs loudly.

Armin was expecting to see Connie and Sasha at the headquarters at some point. They are a part of Miche squad anyway.

But he isn't expecting them to be in civilian clothes.

Which only meant... They were under suspicion too, somehow.

Armin shoves his thoughts to the back of his head. He waves his hand to get their attention. Connie sees him and jumps towards them. His eyes flare into life as he sees Eren and Mikasa. "Hey, Eren, we've heard that Shadis will be--"

The cup Mikasa was holding shatters into pieces and the water splashes away. She glares daggers at Sasha and Connie. They both are shocked into silence.

Connie slowly raises his hands in defeat. "Ok, Ok, sore subject" he laughs awkwardly.

Armin shakes his head. He decides to somehow change the subject by addressing Jean's obvious empty space.

Sasha shrugs instead of answering.

Connie rolls his eyes. "Big Jean has to stay with commander Erwin. He didn't tell us why, though." Connie shrugs. "So what are you guys doing here? I thought you were assigned with Hange squad."

Eren shakes his head. "Oh we were." he sighs. "But I have no idea what happened."

Armin rubs his chin. *I might have.*

if Erwin suspects me.

he's putting me here. Next to the people he suspects the armored to be. ..

Connie points at his cast. "Harsh injury? Is that on captain Hange's orders?"

Eren shakes his head with a sigh. he touches his cast mindlessly.

Armin looks at Reiner from the corner of his eyes. Reiner looks as lonely as he actually is, sitting in the corner of their table and staring outside of the window. He probably has no idea Annie has returned to Marley.

Armin plays with the hem of his sleeve.

It's been three weeks.

Three weeks since they bid farewell and three weeks since the female titan was lost to him. In this time, Their thunder spears have improved a lot, but had yet to make a meaningful impact.

Armin sighs. He massaged his scalp angrily, if only he had paid closer attention to the engineers who made the thunder spears in the other timeline.

Sasha suddenly stills.

She blinks in surprise, and looks south.

"Sasha?" Connie asks. His voice pulls everyone's attention to itself. Sasha ignores them for the favor of walking towards the wall and then pressing her ear to the stone wall.

She closes her eyes with determination. Then she jumps and looks at her friends. "I hear titans!" she yells. "Coming from the south!"

All of the group's attention falls on her.

Eren jumps, he slams his healthy hand to the table. "Titans?!? But that isn't possible."

Armin's blood runs cold, it freezes in his mind. He can see it very clearly now. They've run out of time.

Zeke is here.

Mikasa narrows her eyes. "You're probably wrong, Sasha. We thought the colossal only breaks gates."

Sasha fists her hands in front of her. "You have to believe me--"

Nanaba lands on the window before she can finish, she opens the door and looks at the stunned cadets in their eyes. "Titans have been spotted nearby." she says, kindly but certainly.

All those who doubted Sasha, are now certain.

"There is no time to gear up." Nanaba says, "get on your horses-- the titans are maximum two minutes away from safe distance."

Everyone salutes and runs to the hallway. Their footsteps echo in Armin's empty mind.

Armin stands up on shaking feet, his eyes wide.

This is bad...

This is--

If Annie has said one word about our defenses then it's more or less useless against someone like Zeke--

"Armin!"

Eren's hand feels heavy on his shoulder. He slaps his back a little too harshly. "Snap out of it, Armin, we can get out of this." Eren

doesn't waste another second, he takes his wrist and pulls Armin out of himself. "Let's go, we don't have much time."

Time slows down, just enough that Armin doesn't stumble and fall as Eren pulls him after himself. Armin's mind runs on all possible solutions but all come blank.

They don't have thunder spears.

They don't have thunder spears.

Right now, they can just dig their own graves.

Armin's mind catches to reality when he hears the sound of his horse, a black mare that brings her head down to be pet as Eren puts her reign in Armin's hand.

Eren takes his own out, his jade green eyes look around for a third horse kept in this stall.

And then, Armin's eyes dart around the stables. "Where's... Where's Mikasa?" Armin asks. "Isn't that lilith? Her horse?"

Eren curses under his breath. "I don't know." he answers. "She's about to show up at some point, let's get her horse ready too."

Armin remembers Eren has only one functioning hand so he shoves the horse's reign into his hand and prepares Mikasa's horse herself. "Where is she?!? We have a minute left--"

"I'm here." Mikasa runs inside the stables. She's carrying two bags on her back and has an unknown blank look on her face. She takes her horse from Armin's hand. "Here." Mikasa throws the bag for him and Armin catches it. It takes a moment for Armin to read what's inside. It's obvious from the sound of metal inside.

His ODM gear.

Mikasa hops on her horse, nodding in response. She takes her horse's rein. "Let's go now."

Eren huffs. "Hey, what about me?" Eren asks. "Where's my ODM?"

Mikasa sends him an angry look. "Seriously? We need to move Eren!" she says, her eyes falling to his hand, or well, the lack thereof.

Armin nods. He throws his ODM over the horse and hops on it. "Shake it off, Eren, it's not like you need it!" he says. He fixes the bag over his shoulder and pushes his horse forward.

Eren mumbles something unintelligible and hops on his own horse.

It took them less than a minute to catch up to the rest of the cadets who were running north. Armin sees the titans behind them. He stares at them, stunned to see so many following them with such speed.

Armin shuts his eyes. "There is nothing you can do now," he tells himself. "Focus on survival."

Because of him, Eren and Mikasa are caught up in this mess too. He has to find a way out. He just has to.

"GELGAR, lead the southern forces!"

Armin snaps his head at Miche. Miche just sprints past them in the opposite direction. He heads exactly towards the titans running after them.

"Is he nuts!?!?" Eren yells.

"No, Believe it! That guy is one of the strongest this regiment has." Connie yells back. "I'm sure we'll see him again--"

Armin licks his lips.

He isn't so sure about that.

Connie once told him what happened this time.

It was a long night of watching duty on the beach while everyone else was sleeping. Armin was on duty and Connie simply couldn't sleep, so he joined Armin next to the fire and vented the first things that came to his mind. So Armin has a vague idea of what happened in the past timeline.

And this time... It wasn't much different.

The scouts scattered to alert all the lands in the territory of wall Rose. Sasha and Mikasa separated to check on Sashas village and He and Reiner followed Connie.

Armin was the only one not surprised at seeing Mrs Springer like a titan. He stared at it until Gelgar told him to snap out of it and Eren dragged him back on his horse.

And Armin was the only one not surprised when their squad met Nanaba's near the wall. The two squads met without once finding a hole.

So, the group decided to take refuge in Utgard castle.

Armin argued.

He said they should just climb up the wall where it would be safe. He said staying in a castle like that is just stupidity.

But they didn't listen.

He had half a mind to drag Eren back, to put his ODM gear on and get separated from the group but...

Now, he can just blame himself.

He sighs loudly, burying his face in his bent knees. The fire in front of him cracks and burns. He can't bring himself to look up at either of Miche's squad.

"Don't worry, Armin." Nanaba says kindly.

Gelgar leans back. "You're letting your paranoia control you, that's never a good thing."

Eren grips his cast. He looks at both Nanaba and Gelgar with a frown. "Armin's paranoia has saved both of us countless times!" he says confidently. "I trust his instincts."

Nanaba shakes his head. "Trusting instincts and anxiety are two different things with a very thin border." she tells them. "It's a fine line but it can make a huge difference."

Eren opens his mouth to say something but Armin stops him by putting a hand on his shoulder. They are right, but not about this one time, they're not.

Gelgar stands up, "ok, I'll take the first shift." he says. "You rookies get some rest."

Armin leans his head against the wall. He has some time until Zeke decides to ambush them. After all, his and Piecks resources are here.

But considering he's been late for everything, Armin can assume they have an hour or two of peace left.

The moment his head rests against the tiles, an idea crosses his mind.

I'm an idiot!

The secret is out of the bag so I can just ask Eren or Ymir to transform and carry us back to Trost!

Eren might not be able to transform because of his injury but Ymir certainly isn't!

It hits him and something breaks in the back of his mind.

He can no longer keep his eyes open. He fights to stay conscious but then he's hit with an undeniable wave of soreness.

His eyes slowly shut and all his muscles relax, being pulled into a deep slumber.

Pulling Armin into sleep when founder Ymir doesn't want him to change something major is a habit of hers, apparently.

"Did he really fall asleep?" Krista asks, looking at Armin's exhausted face.

Eren stands up, walks to Armin and shakes him a few times.

"Armin... Minnie... Wake up..." he whispers.

Armin's eyes don't open.

Krista blinks in surprise. "Is he ever alive?" she asks.

Eren shoots her an angry look. "Bite your tongue! Do you want me to talk about Ymir like that!?" he snaps.

Krista frowns. "I guess not." she whispers.

Eren kneels down, he takes off his coat and folds it into a pillow. Armin doesn't wake up as he moves him to lie down and puts his make-shift pillow under his head. "He falls asleep like that when he thinks too hard or feels too anxious." Eren whispers out loud. He gently strokes Armin's blond hair out of his face. "It's a habit he doesn't know of."

Eren stands up again, deciding to leave Armin and let him enjoy his spare moments of peace. He fixes his cast and makes it a little more

comfortable hanging around his neck. "Where'd they disappear to?"

Krista looks at the doors. "Ymir and Reiner went to explore. Connie went to look for food. Others are on duty." she says. "Eren... What is in Armin's bag?"

Eren hums. "Armin's ODM. Mikasa picked it up for him." he rubs the back of his neck. "These two have the best survival instincts around... And then there's me."

"I'm sure you have... *something* ." Krista says. "By the way, how are you taking the news?"

"What news?"

"Your mom's marriage, what else?"

Eren slowly takes a deep breath. "Not good, to be honest. Better than Mikasa. But-- sometimes I wonder why Shadis?" he sighs through his nose. "Although... It's not like mom has a choice."

Krista hums. "You know. I don't think you told her what you wanted to do." she says as a matter of fact.

Eren shrugs. "How can I-- it's not like I can drop a bomb like that after she announced her wedding." he mumbles. "And besides--"

Eren stops talking when he hears footsteps.

It's Gelgar.

"Get everyone to the roof now. Titans incoming!"

Krista and Eren freeze on the spot.

"MOVE!"

Eren goes to wake up Armin and Krista rushes to the doors to alert the others. Eren kneels down and takes Armin's side. "Armin, Armin,

WAKE UP!" Eren shakes him as much as he can with one hand.

Armin's eyes move behind his eyelids and he suddenly opens them. "Titan!" he screams. "We should use your titan to get back fo Sina--"

Eren narrows his eyes. "I'm afraid we can't do that anymore..." he whispers. "Pure titans have attacked us. Bad news, Armin, they're more than I can fight."

Armin jumps to his feet. His dizzy head almost makes him fall down to the ground. He holds his head in his hands until his head clears. "Are you ok?" Eren asks, searching Armin's face for any signs of illnesses.

Armin shakes his head. "I'm ok."

Eren puts a hand on his shoulder. "We should go to the roof." he tells him. Eren doesn't wait for him to respond but takes his hand and rushes after him.

They gather up on the roof and Miche's squad stares at the hoard of titans below. Nanaba suddenly turns around. "Leave the pure titans to us, let the maneuver gear do what it was designed to." Nanaba says, the rest of the squad take out their blades. "Head back to the castle and make sure it's secure."

They all salute in unison and rush down. Miche's squad jumps to face the titans ahead of them.

As they run down the stairs, Connie smiles at everyone nervously. "These guys are the strongest I've ever seen!" Connie assures them, repeating what he'd said about Miche. "As long as they have gas and blades... They'll be ok."

Armin takes a deep breath. "That is a huge 'if'." he whispers quietly as he follows the group rushing down the stairs.

Nanaba and Gelgar didn't deserve to die this way.

And again, neither did thousands of others.

Armin closes his eyes and looks away. There is no point in watching them suffer. No point in watching their misery.

Nanabas yells suddenly cease.

The silence gives Armin, Eren, Reiner, Ymir and Krista the clarity of the situation. The titans look above and their mouths water. Their hands claw at the castle and there is very little time left over this castle.

To add on top of everything, Zeke is sitting above the walls. Armin knows he won't stop until he has this castle back and has erased all traces that they were ever here.

Armin needs to think of a way.

His eyes fall to the other castle, the building is shattered by the beast titans attacks, but the stables is somehow still standing and the horses are tied there.

Armin swallows hard. "We need to think of a way out," he declares. He turns around and meets each of his comrades' eyes. "And I have a plan. We need a distraction while the others escape to the horses."

Armin sighs loudly.

It's to throw the secret away for the sake of survival, he's surprised Eren hasn't tried to transform already. "Eren..." he says loudly, his violet eyes meeting Eren's jade green ones. "It's time for you to transform."

The group is shocked into silence.

Eren blinks in surprise, then points his thumb at his own chest. "Positive?" he asks. Not because he doubts Armin's judgment,

because he isn't sure of himself.

Armin nods.

He looks at Reiner, Ymir, Connie, and Krista from the corner of his eyes.

"I know you're probably tired and drained but you have to try. Otherwise we won't be able to get out." Armin looks down at himself. "Thanks to Mikasa, I have ODM but there is no way I can deal with so many pure titans on my own. So..."

"Time out! TIME OUT!!" Connie yells, standing between Armin and Eren and pushing them away.

He looks at Armin and then at Eren, almost betrayed. "You mean--you--" he hits his finger against Eren's chest. "You're the rogue titan??"

Eren slowly takes off the cast from his hand, just to reveal he doesn't have one. He throws the cast and bandages away. "I'm afraid, yes." he says.

Ymir's eyebrows twitch angrily. "You have gotta be kidding me."

Eren ignores their words. "I can try," he climbs over the edge and brings his hand to his mouth.

Armin stops him, he grabs his shirt and shakes his head. "No, transform up here." he orders.

"But the castle--"

"I don't care about the castle!!" Armin yells angrily. "If you jump down and wouldn't be able to transform, you'll die!!" he yells. "So either try to transform here or not at all."

Eren takes a deep breath. He doesn't jump, and slowly holds his healthy hand up. He bites the muscles of his thumb hard enough to

bruise.

He expects the sky to crack and lightning to fall. He expects the castle to fall but neither happens.

Eren's hands look painful, bitten raw and bleeding until his blood is black.

And yet--

Eren sinks his teeth into his hand again, blood oozes out of the fresh wound. But no lightning appears. Nothing to show his titan is coming any closer.

Armin can't see this anymore. He grabs Eren's hand to stop him from biting into his hand again. "Stop." Armin murmurs when Eren's helpless jade eyes meet his own. "It's no use."

Ymir laughs out loud. "Oh my-! Are you sure you can actually turn into a titan??" She laughs out loud. "Looks to me like you can't!?!"

Eren grinds his teeth. Ymir's words fuel his anger and it makes his blood boil. He wants to bite down on his hand again but Armin wraps his hand around Eren's abdomen and pulls him back on the roof.

The castle shakes. Armin jumps to his feet and leans down to see what's happening below.

Titans.

Titans that look up at him hungrily.

Armin isn't afraid, he knows there is someone in paths waiting to revive him again and again. But how many lives is it going to take until these titans stop eating him? Since he'll just be revived and eaten again.

Armin flinches at the thought.

What's worse? No one else has this ability.

"We need a distraction." Armin says as a matter of fact. His eyes look at the Beast titan from afar.

Armin looks on the other side of the tower, he notes that the side that Zeke couldn't see had far less protection than the ones facing him. The horses should be bound there and safe. The titans also wouldn't be thinking of attacking the horses because Zeke won't.

Armin narrows his eyes. If they manage to get to those horses, it'll be over.

"As I said. We need a distraction." he says, facing the group.

Armin has half a mind to shove Reiner down the tower. He pushes it aside immediately, it's too soon. Besides, the others will fight him if he just kicks Reiner down the tower out of the blue.

Armin clears his throat. He takes a deep breath. "The titans seem to be obeying the beast titan right over there." he murmurs. He turns around to point his index finger at the beast titan. "If we have a suitable distraction, the titans are likely to follow it rather than to follow the other's scent. This way, a group of us can escape towards the horses."

This time, Armin is looking directly at Ymir. "That beast titan seems to just want this tower. So no amount of waiting is going to help us here." he says.

Ymir narrows her eyes.

Armin doesn't relent. He hopes his eyes can convey what he means.

I know your secret.

you're a titan, act on it.

Or maybe...

A mischievous smile appears on Armin's face. He picks up his back and the ODM gear Mikasa has packed for him. "Krista." he says. "I'm useless with ODM, and my size matches yours. You and I are the only ones that can use this ODM." Armin holds the gear up. "One of us has to make this distraction while the rest go for a probably pointless escape." he says.

He sees Ymir grind her teeth, fisting her hands on her sides.

Armin fights the urge to laugh like a madman. Ymir is taking the bait, *so easily* .

Armin swallows hard, the pretense of a concerned comrade comes back on her face. "I'm useless at this. But you can provide more time for others to escape." Armin holds up his ODM gear in front of Krista.

He watches the fear and hope rise in her eyes at the same time that Ymir's burns with madness. Krista shut her eyes. "Yes!" she says. "We have an ODM. And I'm the best candidate we have. I'll do it. So you guys can escape."

"NO!" Ymir yells. She snaps the ODM out of Armin's hands and takes Krista's shoulder and shakes her hard enough to pull her hair out of her ties. "Are you crazy!?!"

Krista puts a hand over hers. She smiles bitterly. "I'm so-sorry, but this is our only--only way." she whispers.

Ymir growls through grit teeth. "Those people didn't die for you to throw your life away like that!? Can't you remember anything we talked about in that snowy mountain."

Armin hums. "So you're saying you have a better plan, Ymir?" he says, loud enough for all of them to hear.

Ymir snaps her head at Armin's direction. "You manipulative bastard!!" she yells. She walks to Armin, maybe giving her a piece of

her mind for daring to suggest such a way out. Eren immediately jumps between them.

He spreads his hands and Armin is easily hidden behind him. Eren's jade green eyes narrow. "It's not Armin's fault we've run out of options." he says calmly.

"Ran out of--" Ymir clicks her tongue. "You bastard, you knew all along didn't you? Didn't you, shorty!?"

"Hey," Eren says, a threat in his tone.

Ymir laughs to herself. "Ah man..." she takes a deep breath. "Connie..." she whispers. Connie arches an eyebrow. "Do you have that knife?"

Connie takes it out from his pocket and holds it up. Ymir yanks it from his hand. "Good." She pets his head but Connie hits it away.

"What are you going to do with it anyway?"

Ymir shakes her head. She ignores Connie's question and instead walks up to Krista again.

Ymir puts her hands on her shoulders and smiles. "Krista..." she whispers. "Do you remember our promise on that snowy mountain?"

Krista's eyes widen, her blue eyes meet Ymir's hazel orbs and the other smiles.

The darkness disappears with the crack of dawn, the sun rises, slowly assaulting their vision.

Sensing the change, Eren drops his defensive stance and just looks at the two. Armin takes a deep breath and looks away.

Historia and him were never close. They weren't close when he acted her part in a bait. They weren't close when she and Eren

plotted behind his back. And they weren't close when she was organizing his execution.

And this timeline is no different.

(Armin's heart aches thinking about what the two might be feeling. Their silence is full of unspoken words.)

Ymir steps back, she tests the sharpness of the knife with her finger. She looks at Armin from behind Eren. "Fine, Arlert, it looks like I have to trust your plan. I'll give the distraction you need." Ymir says. Then, she turns to Eren with a knowing smirk. "Watch and learn, Jaeger."

Armin gets the cue, he immediately starts putting his ODM gear on. "I'll use my ODM gear to get you to the horses. In this order. Krista. Connie. Eren and then Reiner."

Eren clicks his tongue. "How the hell do you wanna--" but Armin effectively silences him by holding up a hand to his chest. Eren meets Armin's eyes. The wilderness in his green eyes is easily subdued.

Ymir smiles up at Krista one last time. "Krista... I have no right to tell you how to live your life... So this is more like a hope." she says, smiling genuinely for the first time. "Live a life you can be proud of. Remember our promise on the snowy mountains... Krista..."

Ymir steps back.

And runs to the edge, she jumps down without once hesitating.

"YMIR!!" Krista yells, leaning forward as much as she can.

Ymir transforms into a titan right in front of her. Lightning strikes and a jaw titan crawls out of the steam to everyone's shock.

Ymir starts cutting the napes and slitting heads, killing as many titans as she can. And Armin intends to use every chance. "Ok! The titans

are distracted! We can't waste this opportunity!" Armin yells. "Krista, you first!"

He extends his hand and waits for Krista to take it. He isn't physically strong enough to take them and they all had to hang on to him while they jumped down with his ODM.

Krista's gasps. "I'll wait for Ymir!" she says, looking at the titan fight below.

"Fine! Suit yourself!" Armin yells angrily. "Eren!"

"Armin isn't it better if--"

"NO!" Armin yells. He doesn't wait for the others response. "Connie, come on."

Connie shakes his head. "Yeah, Yeah ok!" he whispers. He hands Armin's shoulders.

He tackles into him until they are both falling from the castle. They land on the ground and just like Armin expected, the titans are ignoring them. Connie gets off of him when Armin orders him to take a horse and not look back at all. Connie does look back.

But he shuts his eyes and looks away as he rides further and further.

Armin uses his ODM to climb back up in the castle. Eren stops Armin. "Armin, take Reiner, he's injured." he says.

Armin grits his teeth. "You're lacking a hand!?!!" he reminds him.

"Just get going." Eren pulls Reiner to Armin. Armin doesn't protest, although how they managed to land safely will always be a mystery to Armin. He says the same things he did to Connie but Reiner is much more hesitant on riding on his horse and leaving.

Armin doesn't care.

He is running in pure adrenaline and rush of the moment. He flies up to the castle. Time slows down when he spots a titan looking directly at him. The titans green eyes look directly at Armin and follow him.

The blonde realizes, with chilling clarity, that Zeke now knows of his plan. Armin lands on the roof, his blood soaked eyes stare at Eren.

Eren narrows his eyes. "Armin-- you should take Krista first--"

"DON'T ARGUE WITH ME!!" he yells. He doesn't wait for Eren to respond. He tackles him and they both fall from the tower.

They don't have time.

They don't have time.

Zeke saw him.

Zeke is going to come for him.

In that moment between mid-air, Armin clung to Eren's body as they fell down.

They need to leave.

If that means leaving Krista and Ymir alone here, then so be it.

Armin switches to ODM and immediately flies away to the stables. "We'll get a horse and leave!" he shouts, still flying mid air.

"We!?" Eren yells back. "Don't tell me you--"

But Armin doesn't have the chance to argue because his ODM wires are yanked and he is thrown back. He loses control and Eren is thrown away on the ground.

Armin falls to the ground without control, he lands on his right foot and it bends and breaks, making Armin scream in pain.

"Armin!" He can hear Eren's faint yell in the background but the pain in his feet dulls all of his senses, it dulls his sense of hearing long enough that he doesn't hear the gigantic footsteps of the beast titan behind him.

When he does hear him, it's too late.

Armin's body freezes from head to toe. He senses the beast's great shadow first, then he turns around and sees the monster looking down at him with a monstrous grin.

"There you are..." Zeke laughs. "You purple eyed people have a great talent for hiding."

The beast titan sits down.

It makes the earth shake.

The beast tilts his head. "You must be Arlert, am I correct?"

Armin hands start to shake, they vibrate no matter how much he fists them. Beads of sweat start forming in his forehead.

The beast titan narrows his eyes. "It's rude not to answer a question like this," he says. "I'm guessing that really does make you Armin Arlert."

Annie...

A distant voice tells him.

Annie told him your name.

but why?

why would Annie mention the name of a not so special cadet?

The beast titans lips spread to a grin. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I will be taking back. No more playing hide and seek for you with your

powers, I'm afraid."

Armin shuts his eyes and tries to crawl away. The beast easily pins his injured leg to the ground. A blood curdling scream leaves Armin's lip, The beast applies even more pressure.

"Open your eyes, boy." he says as a threat.

Armin obliges.

This time, the beast titans face is close to his own. The smile looks even more intimidating and horrifying. "Oh, the purple eyes, exactly what I'm looking for." the titan laughs. "The heart of the founder... Nice to finally meet you, King of the walls."

Armin blinks in surprise.

What...

What is he talking about?

His purple eyes are a new anomaly but this? What does it have to do with him being the founding titan unless--

Time seems to slow down as Zeke's hand closes down on his injured body. Armin's breath catches in his throat just as the realization hits him.

Eren's eyes were purple in the paths.

Frieda's eyes were purple.

The fingers get closer and closer to his body.

Uri's eyes were purple...

... But why are my eyes purple?

Armin doesn't care anymore. He covers his face with his hands crossed even though he knows it'll do nothing. He braces himself.

But just the sound of impact comes.

The sound of a punch.

Armin opens his eyes with a gasp.

Eren is there, standing in front of him, holding the beast's hands back. And to both of their shock, Zeke is frozen in place.

Eren raises his head, his back is to Armin.

Armin crawls back, from his scared instincts. His injured leg doesn't even look like a leg anymore, just a mess of blood and bones. Eren smiles softly and looks at Armin from the corner of his eyes.

Armin's heart skips a beat.

Eren's eyes are a deep shade of purple and glowing majestically.

He has access to the founder's powers now, even if he doesn't know what they are yet. **"You're ok, it'll heal."** he says, but his voice is too deep, too stoic. His own amputated hand immediately regenerates.

Almost on command, Armin starts growing another working leg.

Then he lets go of the beast titans hand and Zeke pulls his hand back in shock. "Impossible!" the beast yells. "You are--"

"Don't you talk to him!" Eren shouts, his screams make a ripple that echoes through the area.

The beast titan leans back, as if he was offended.

Eren stomps his next step. Venom dripped from his glowing eyes.

"Don't you threaten him!" his shouts are getting more and more desperate. They ripple through the air, empty threats spoken so loudly that it makes everyone assume they were true.

"Don't you even look at him!" Eren points his fingers at the beast titans head. **"What makes you think you're above us!? What gives you the right to take our freedom!"**

Armin is stunned. Eren and Zeke should be in paths right now, right? And yet here Eren was, in front of him. Armin feels the air dance on his skin and his heart thump while he stares at Eren's neck. Although Eren didn't know it... The founder and someone of royal blood had touched each other, that meant--

"I'll kill you all! I'LL MAKE THESE TITANS EAT YOU UNTIL YOU'RE NOTHING LEFT!"

The ground shakes under the footsteps of titans. All the pure titans in the area run back at Zeke instead of guarding the tower. The beast titan screams, shouting orders at the titans to stop clawing at his body. To no use.

The titans bite and eat the beast titans body piece by piece. Zeke tries to run away but the titans follow him. Their roars assault Armin's ears and he covers them as much as he can.

Eren's command has overridden Zekes...

Armin thinks in awe.

Of course... Eren is the founder, after all.

"Don't think too hard."

Eren kneels down and picks Armin up bridal style with no problem, Armin makes a small sound at the shock of it but doesn't protest. He keeps covering his ears to prevent the violent sound of eating flesh following him.

Eren's hands pull him closer to his chest. Armin feels trapped in a warm hug. Eren is running as fast as he can while carrying Armin bridal style, towards the carriage.

Armin looks up with a pout. "Why?"

Eren's eyes are clear and jade green, his nervous smile is beautiful to look at.

"I can hear the wheels behind your mind." Eren says sarcastically, "don't think too hard until we get to Trost and to a doctor."

He can see Reiner riding back to them. Armin doesn't hear what they say correctly. What he does hear however, is Reiner and Eren preparing a carriage and Eren lays Armin down on the back of it.

They're safe.

They're safe for however long this spell will last, and Armin knows it's not long.

Any minute, Zeke can pull the control back and they'd be on square one. They need to leave now.

Eren pet his hair back. "Don't move that leg, we don't know how reliable that leg really is."

Armin looks at Reiner who takes the reins. "Let's move!" he yells. "Before those titans--"

"YMIR!"

Armin shuts his eyes.

No. No. No. No!

"Krista and Ymir are still there!?" Reiner yells. "They're-- are they trapped?"

Armin can list every reason why they should leave right now if he had a week. One of them being that Ymir is a titan shifter and the other being that the pure titans can start obeying Zeke any moment now. "I don't know, but those titans can--" he starts to yell.

He stops when Eren brushes some of his strand hair out of Armin's face. Armin gets what the meaning of his actions is. "Eren, no wait!!" His hand latches to his wrist, maddeningly tight. "I won't let you!"

Eren stops for a moment.

He doesn't meet Armin's face, not at all, he can't find the courage in himself to.

"I can't abandon Krista like that." he says simply.

It happens in a second, His other wrist holds Armin's hand in place and he yanks his hand out.

"Take him."

Eren's touch freezes.

Reiner pushes the horses to start and Eren turns around and starts running back to the castle.

Armin pushes himself up, staring at Eren's back as he gets smaller and smaller in the distance. "What-- NO WAIT!" Armin shouts, snapping his head at Reiner's direction. "Where did he go?!"

Armin stares at him as he runs towards the battlefield.

His mind replays the many times he has heard those words.

I can't sacrifice Historia!

Those words he repeated over and over when he was justifying his actions.

I can't sacrifice Historia!

I can't sacrifice Historia!

Historia. Historia. Historia.

"He chose... He chose Historia over me."

Armin's fingers wrap around his own cloak. His heart beats maddeningly as he slams his hand to the carriage.

"AGAIN! He has-- he hasn't changed at all he--"

"Armin, you ok back there??" Reiner yells as he pushes the horses to go faster.

Armin's eyes can only see red now. He stares at the titans ahead. He can hear the roars of titans but he doesn't care. It doesn't bother him.

He's been in worse situations. He remembers the rumbling very clearly and the reason he was in it.

I can't sacrifice Historia!

I can't abandon Krista like that.

Armin fists his hand and hits the carriage.

"Why..."

He yells, hitting his fist against the carriage hard enough to make his hand bruise.

"Why..."

He hits his fist again and again and again.

"Why... Why... *Why*... Why is it when she's involved, why does she come first?... Why is it... When she's involved..."

Armin can't stop the scream from tearing out of his throat.

"WHY DON'T YOU LISTEN TO REASON!?!"

~Hey~ press the kudos button. Do it. Do it again! Thanks <3

my twitter is: @[Rose_lily_sun](#)

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Maybe I should leave the place that doesn't wan...

Chapter 11: Maybe I should leave the place that doesn't want me.

Annie and Reiner attack.

Armin makes a few choices.

Eren won't let him leave.

I'M ALIVE Y'ALL!

You know, was battling writers block.

Thanks you all who left a kudos or a comment, the only excitement that made me force myself to write this chapter. Sigh.

I just discovered the joy of Naruto and I'm hooked. I love Sasuke so far, it reminds me so much of my own little brother. Just my brother probably wouldn't have sit put as I slaughtered our entire clan xD

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Weeks before:

Most people in the internment zone of liberio could go their entire short lives without seeing a titan. Pure titan or a titan shifter.

So it came to a surprise when the earth started to shake and the police sirens ran along the southern side of the internment zone.

People have gathered to see what was wrong, but all they could do was watch the giant wall of the internment zone.

And to their surprise, there came a giant head of the female titan.

Annie jumps out of her titan body and over the wall completely ignorant of the marleyan police shouting for her arrest. She runs over the wall until she finds a ladder to slide down to the ground.

Eldians watch her with confused eyes and murmurs she pays no attention to. Annie, exhausted from running for days in her titan form, keeps running until she reaches her house, in the north of the internment zone.

She reaches that old, dusty house she never missed. And to her surprise, an old man is carrying a bag of groceries up to the door and putting his keys into the hole.

"Father!" she shouts, forcing her legs to keep running.

The old man drops every grocery he's shopped.

He is frozen.

He stays frozen until Annie jumps the distance between them and hugs her father tightly.

"Dad! I'm back!" She whispers in his ear.

The old man's eyes widened. "Annie..." he mumbles. "Annie, I'm so sorry..." his shaking hands wrap around Annie's smaller body.

"Thank you! Thank you! You've come back home!"

The two don't notice the crowd gathering around them. The crowd whisper and mumble between themselves. In it are two new silent faces.

Pieck looks at father daughter with a gentle smile. "Let her have it. You can question her later." she says, not taking her eyes off the

scene. She doesn't need to explain further what she means.

Zeke keeps his cigarette between his fingers, he lets it give out precious black smoke for as long as it's almost burning his fingers.

He lets the cigarette fall to the ground and crushes it under his heel.

"So Annie..."

Annie sits cross legged on the comfortable couch in Zekes office and stares out of the window. She can't see much of the view, just tall buildings and the polluted air.

After five years of clean air, the atmosphere feels almost sickening.

Zeke brings two cups of coffee and puts one in front of Annie with some sugar. "I remember you liked it sweet." he points out and sits down in front of her.

Annie turns her eyes to the bubbling coffee.

She never liked the taste.

She lifts her head and stares at Zeke. She never liked him either.

A few seconds of dense silence passes. Enough that Zeke clears his throat and starts talking. "I was expecting you to be the first one to come back. With you... Elegant... Entrance, I'm guessing Magath doesn't know you're here."

Annie crosses her arms over her chest, effectively silent.

Zeke hums. "You know... He will come after you sooner or later... By now, he has probably heard about your grand entrance." he takes a long sip of his coffee. "It makes me wonder, did you swim all the way to Marley?"

Annie grinds her teeth together angrily. "If you have a point, make it! I need to go back to my father."

Zeke slowly lowers his cup to the table. "You don't have the founder yet, have you?" he asks.

Annie looks down, silent.

Zeke narrows his eyes. "And I suppose. That means you've deserted your responsibility. You know the punishment for dissertation--"

Annie suddenly stands up. "Shut your mouth! You don't have the slightest clue!"

Zeke arches an eyebrow. "I'm not your enemy, Annie." he says. "And I'm just telling you what'll happen if Magath catches you." Zeke points at her spot on the couch. "I've sent pieck to keep Magath busy for a while. We have time to talk, and if you have good info on the founder, I'll vouch for you."

Annie pours her anger into angry whispers and sits down.

Zeke narrows his eyes. "I would be more polite with my only chance of staying alive," he reminds her.

Although Annie wishes he wasn't, Zeke really is her only chance. If Magath finds out she doesn't have the founder and has abandoned Reiner, with Marcel and Berthold dead, he won't listen to the reasons Armin's made to keep her alive.

Zeke leans back. "I'm all ears."

Annie takes a deep breath and starts talking. He explains everything that happened from the moment Marcel died and Berthold kicked down the walls and the events that followed and their deaths.

Zeke seems more interested in her words the more she continues. She asks more and more questions about the rogue titan that closed the wall and the events in the forest.

Zeke interrupts her. "So, you're saying Reiner and you both attacked this rogue titan..." he completes. "And people with flying swords defeated you?"

Annie clicks her tongue. "Two Ackermans were in that group." She reminds him.

That seems to make Zeke even more interested. "Did those two Ackerman seem... Invested... In someone?"

"I don't know about the scouts lovelives."

"Annie..." Zeke says, a hint of threat in his voice.

Annie lowers her voice. "Fine. I don't know about the Levi squad but Mikasa was strangely protective of his friends Armin Arlert and Eren Yeager."

Zeke hums. "Eren Yeager... As in the rogue titan?"

"Yes."

Zeke presses his lips to a thin line. "Good, go on. I suppose this is the part where you are captured, am I correct?"

Annie nods. She skips as much detail as she can about that night Armin poisoned her so she says: "and I was thrown in a prison. The guards were too scared to torture me but the prison looked strong. So I didn't attempt to transform for a while until..." Annie bites her lip. "Until Armin sneaked me out and let me go."

"Did he give any reasons as to why?"

"He said... He said he wanted us to change paths in peace." she summarizes. "And I ran all the distance from the walls to here in the past few days."

Zeke clears his throat, for some reason, his face looks troubled. "Annie... Did this Eren Yeager... Mention anything about his family

by any chance?"

"Armin said his father was a doctor, and that he learned most of the medical stuff he knows from Dr Yeager." Annie says, narrowing her eyes at Zeke's reaction.

Zeke's face crumbles.

He doesn't say anything for a few minutes but then decides to take a deep breath, all the previous authority is washed from his face. "The person you're talking about-- did he have purple eyes by any chance?"

Annie presses her mouth to a thin line. "Uhm I think..." Annie grinds her teeth together. "Where are you going with this?"

Zeke hums. "Just answer the question Annie."

Annie clicks her tongue, the hot cocoa suddenly tasted so bitter. "Well, he... He did." she says loudly. "He did. But lately his eyes were turning more and more purple everytime I saw him. Something violet."

Zeke's eyes shut open. His mouth pulls into a rare triumphant smirk. "Ah, I see." he chuckles. "So purple eyes, hm?"

Annie nods again. "Where are you going with this, *warchief*."

"I was expecting such a horrible slip up from Reiner and Berthold but from you? Annie... Annie... Annie..." Zeke shakes his head. "I'll repeat what you told me and I'll show you how stupidly obvious it sounds."

Annie's eyebrow twitches angrily. "What do you mean?"

"You came across someone Who A. has an Ackerman on his side, B. Can somehow control or manipulate a titan shifter to protect him even when the titan shifter is on the verge of death, and C. has purple eyes."

Zeke shakes his head, thoroughly disappointed. "The cherry on the top is that he also sends you, someone who killed his people, back to Marley so you can kill more." he repeats. "Doesn't that somehow look extremely like someone with the first king of the walls mentality and position?"

The ice cold realization hits Annie. Then something in the back of her mind tells her this can not be true.

"Which means, we need you to go and bring this Arlert fellow. For all we know, he might actually be the founding titan." Zeke explains. "You will come with me. Due to your new information, our mission will be delayed but we will need your assistance in capturing Armin Arlert and his founding titan."

Annie blinks in surprise. "That's not possible." she shakes her head. "I just came back! You can't just shove me into another mission!"

"I'm afraid not, Annie." Zeke shakes his head. "Now that we are this close to this matter, we can't keep wasting time."

"What!?!!" she snaps.

"Either you agree to this proposal-- or I'll convince the council to give the female titan to another warrior." Zeke threatens. "The founder is this close, Annie. This is close. I want the founder. I want Armin Arlert in Marley." Zeke says, seriously.

He stands up.

"Rest as much as you can. The preparations for the mission is going to take three weeks but I suppose Marley will want to train you for all those three weeks."

Zeke stands up and opens the office door for her. "Have fun until Magath calls you in his office."

Annie grinds her teeth and stands up immediately. She makes sure to glare at Zeke as he goes out.

Now

Eren runs as fast as he can back towards the ruins of Utgard castle. He can see Historia trying to lift off heavy looking rubble from over Ymir's unconscious body.

While he runs, the other titans are rapidly getting away from them and following the beast titan. Eren can only look at the titan from the corner of his eyes, who kept throwing the titans around and shouting orders.

He doesn't know what will happen.

All he knows is that his desperate attempt at saving Armin from the claws of a titan somehow worked.

He shakes the thoughts away because he needs to concentrate on saving Ymir and Krista and running back to safety. He kneels down next to Krista and helps her push the ruins away.

"Hang on, Ymir..." Krista whispers as she grabs her shoulders and tries to pull the other girl out.

Eren shakes his head several times. "Come on, Krista, grab Ymir's legs and we'll carry her out." Eren orders firmly as he takes Krista's place and picks the unconscious girl from under her armpits.

Krista jumps into action. She pushes too hard and goes faster than Eren starts to walk.

"Oi! Krista!" Eren snaps. "Calm down! Or you'll make Ymir's injuries worse."

She swears under her breath and follows Eren's lead, the moment they are able to lift Ymir's body, the air suddenly shifts.

Eren stares at the titans who slowly stop running after the beast titan and turn around to the three of them. Eren's breath catches in his throat when a titans eyes meet his own.

Armin was right.. . He thinks distantly.

my orders were lifted from their mind the moment the beast titan was out of their eyesight...

The titans' footsteps follow them and they start running to their meals. Both Historia and Eren are frozen on the ground.

Until a zipping sound echoes in the air and the next moment, a titan falls to the ground. Mikasa lands in front of them with a serious look in her eyes.

"It's ok," she tells them. "Help has arrived."

The scout emblem runs past their eyes as they charge at the titans.

Eren lets out a deep breath he didn't know he was holding and gently lowers Ymir to the ground. Ymir starts to struggle against it. She still lacks an arm and a leg. His fathers medical training kicks in and he realizes they need to cover the wound to prevent an infection.

Eren stops right there, Ymir is a monster like him. They didn't need such care. So he just lowers her to the ground. "Hey, easy there. You proved your point." Eren yells as Ymir starts to gain consciousness and move.

"Ymir!" Krista whispers, gravely relieved as Ymir slowly opens her eyes.

Eren steps back and gives the two the little privacy they can afford just as titans bodies fall to the ground.

Eventually, Hange and her squad gather around Krista and Ymir, all surprised that humanity holds another titan shifter.

But Krista doesn't seem to care. Her eyes soften when Ymir opens her eyes to see her and her smile spreads gently. "My real name..." she whispered, so Ymir could hear it. "... Is Historia Reiss."

That makes Eren smirk. It immediately falls from his lips but Mikasa has already caught a glimpse of it. She arches an eyebrow at Eren. He opens his mouth to say something but then closes it into a gentle smile.

He shrugs.

Mikasa rolls her eyes.

With the scouts, they can safely move to the walls. The lifts come to the ground and take Ymir and Historia up first. All the while, Historia argues with Hange to help Ymir and that she's a good addition to humanity.

Hange doesn't react positively or negatively, they merely nod their head.

Mikasa uses her ODM to climb the wall but Eren has to wait for a lift. He sits on one and waits patiently for it to climb up the walls.

When it reaches the top, he sees a hand stretched out to help him.

Armin looks down at him with emotionless eyes, a stoic face.

Eren's heart skips a beat for a moment. He takes Armin's hand and the blonde helps him up. Once Eren is on the wall, Armin spins around on his heel and walks away.

"Armin..." Eren asks, walking after him.

Armin doesn't respond.

"Armin, Im, I'm sorry can we talk?"

Armin stops. He looks at Eren from the corner of his eyes.

Eren swallows hard. "Armin, I'm sorry..." he wants to take Armin's hand into his own but Armin yanks his hand out and steps back.

Eren's heart beats maddeningly in his chest. "Please don't give me the silent treatment!" he pleads. Armin's face doesn't betray any emotions.

"You want me to talk?" Armin whispers. "Fine, *get lost* ." he yells.

Eren's jade green eyes start to hurt. "At least tell me what I did!? Come on please-- why are you mad at-"

But Armin purposely bumps into him and walks away. He walks over and stands next to section commander Hange. They exchange words that Eren can't hear and doesn't particularly care.

Eren takes a deep breath through his nose.

Suddenly, a flash of electricity pulses through his body. Something very similar to the moment when his hand touched the beast titan.

Eren clutches the clothes above his heart, only to remember he doesn't have one.

His mind drowns in nothingness only for a moment before images clash in his mind.

"Then what?"

In Front of him is Annie. In a room that looks distinctly like an office but with devices he doesn't recognize.

Everything is too black, too gray, too strict.

Annie, at least, is a familiar face. She's barely restraining herself from choking him, her hands fisted and eyes narrowed dangerously. "Then what, Zeke?" she says. "Let's just assume we got Armin. And let's just assume he has the founding titan. Then what? "

What??

Eren's eyes widened.

What do they want with Armin?

Who's... Who's memories are these?

"the answer is simple."

The owner of the memories says that. He lights up a cigarette and puts it on his lips. The taste and smell makes Eren gag.

"We just have one of the warriors eat him and inherit his titan." he says, waving his hand. "Don't worry you're suddenly sentimental, Annie. Just because he made the mistake of freeing you, doesn't mean you have to return the favor."

He clears his throat, Annie's eyes feel even more vengeful.

"Arlert didn't have a father waiting for him at home." he reminds him.

"Yes he does, Zeke." Annie murmurs, then she snaps her head to the side and growls: "I'll bring him here. Just keep up your promise and make sure my father isn't killed by those bastard marleyan police."

The memory doesn't finish. It continues but Eren's senses quickly snap back to reality when Sasha yells "I hear titan footsteps!"

That knocks the group into a fit of silence. Even Hange and Krista-- Hange and Historia stare at Sasha in surprise.

Sasha throws her hands in the air, her ODM gear jiggles as she jumps. "I hear it and- and I know it-- it's--" her brown eyes morph into an expression of loss. "It's Annie..."

Armin's eyes widened.

That's the only reaction because Eren has been staring at him, waiting for him to respond like he always did.

Armin takes a deep breath and turns to Hange. "If the female is working for the beast. Then that means they are both looking for the same person. They are looking for someone. The best chance we have of putting off the fight is to confuse them. We have to wear hoodies and conceal our identities."

Hange chuckles. "Tell me the truth, Armin. Are they looking for you? You guys have yet to explain to me how the hell you escaped those titans." their eyes stare at Eren's. "Is this titan controlling ability something you hid for the greater good too?"

Eren hangs his head in shame and shakes his head. He had no idea.

Still have no idea what happened.

With Armin's silence and their quickly wasting time, Hange shouts at every soldier with ODM to cover their faces with hoodies.

"Section commander Hange! i need a cloak too-" Armin yells.

"A hood?" Niffa asks, arching an eyebrow. "Why would you need a hoodie?"

Armin shuts his eyes. "We were-- we were--"

Niffa smiles. "Don't get too worked up. Here." She takes off her hoodie and folds it gently before giving it to Armin. "My mom made that for me though! Keep it in one piece."

Armin covers himself by pulling down the hood, his lips shake and he bites them, a habit he has when he's thinking very hard.

Let's just assume we got Armin. And let's just assume he has the founding titan. Then what?

What does that mean?

Eren looks at the horizon. He thinks, the dusted wheels in the back of his mind turn and turn.

What does that mean?

Does Annie want Armin for this smoking person?

Is that why she's here?

Does Armin know it? Is that why he asked for a cloak?

Of course he knows...

he's one of the smartest people I know! Of course he's found out somehow and- -

The footsteps become audibly louder and one of Hange's squad throws a cloak at Eren, barking orders at him to wear it.

A few minutes later, The female titan, with all her glory, bursts through the jungle and stares up at the group of scouts.

Armin fists his hands in his side.

Mikasa stands next to him, her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Hey Armin." she asks. "Any idea how we'll defeat her this time?"

Eren looks at the blond from the corner of his eyes, looking for an answer.

Connie and Sasha shake their heads. "We're doomed if we go at her with just blades that do nothing against her." Connie whispers.

Reiner shakes his head. "We're soldiers. Keep a level head, there isn't much we can do but trust in commander Hange."

That makes something in Eren's heart calm.

But then...

The female crouches down on one knee, ready to jump but resting at the same time. Her eyes focused on the group

Armin swallows hard.

"That's... That's the female titan and she's just... Just sitting there like that." Armin whispers. "Is she-- she is! She is waiting for the armor!"

Hange snaps their head at their squad. "Is the message sent?"

Niffa nods. "We sent Abel. Levi squad is on its way with our prototype rockets."

Hearing that these prototype rockets are on their way, makes Eren's heart calm down. They can blast his hand away so they can surely do a number on the female or armored.

"So what? Are we going to just sit here until she jumps at us?" Mikasa growls.

Niffa shakes her head. "Keep your cool, Ackerman. Levi squad is more professional to handle the female and besides--"

"I need her alive..." Hange whsipers, lacing their hands together. "Goodie goodie! Do you think she'll--"

They gather themselves with a sigh. "Either way, capturing her alive is the best way, how much time do you think it'll take for the Levi squad or armored to show up?"

Mikasa takes out her blades. "Why should we even wait? We should either fight or flee while we can."

Hange shakes their head. "We can't outrun her by foot and if she follows us to Trost, we'll give her a fresh load of refugees. Our best chance is that if there is going to be a fight, the fight should be here."

Hange looks at the cadets seriously. "If it comes to that, those without ODM gear should head straight to Trost over the walls and others follow my squad. The chain of command is me, then Niffa, then Abel. Understand?"

Everyone salutes.

Everyone other than Reiner, who is staring at the horizon. And unlike others, his hood isn't covering his face, it slips from his head and falls around his shoulders.

Eren blinks in surprise. "Reiner!" he says loudly. He puts his hand on the other's broad shoulder and tries to shake him out of his trance. "Reiner! Reiner! put your hood back on-- Er--"

Eren's blood runs cold when he sees the look of confusion on Reiner's hazel eyes. His usually steady hands and calm demeanor is shattered. His hands shake, his eyes stare too far ahead and his lips are bitten raw. "Is that the--"

"It's the female titan!" Eren yells. "And it's-- it's waiting for the--"

Reiner suddenly stops. His uninjured hand runs through his hair and clutches it angrily. "Soldiers.... We soldiers need to..." he lets out a shaky breath. "I need to."

Eren feels his distress so he puts a hand on his shoulder. Smiling encouragingly as much as he could. "Eh, Reiner. It's not like you to be so stressed out. Are you alright?"

Reiner shuts his eyes. "Eren... I am... I am not alright."

Eren can feel Armin's look piercing their back.

It's time.

It's time.

Reiner is losing control and they can't wait any longer.

In fact, it's better to confuse Reiners' already shattered resolve further.

Armin looks at Reiner and Eren from the corner of his eyes. The taller is moments away from snapping and without any thunder spears, their upcoming fight will leave nothing but corpses.

If Reiner leaves... And the thunder spears with the Levi squad arrive on time...

Armin licks his lips.

His blue eyes turn around and find Historia fixing the ropes securing Ymir in her bed. She's whispering soothing words even when the other can't hear.

If Armin's heart wasn't made of stone, he would have been phased.

"Historia." he says through gritted teeth, he doesn't bother looking back at the two girls. "Take Ymir and ride away as far as you can. The two of you alone won't grab the female's attention enough to follow you. This is going to be a battle ground soon."

Hange looks back at Ymir and Historia. They sigh loudly and turn to one of their squad. "Give her a horse and transfer her deep into the walls in the same cell we kept Annie Leanheart." they order.

Historia stands up to her feet. "A cell!?" Historia yells, "she gave her all for humanity!"

Eren lets go of Reiner for a second to get close to their conversation. That makes Armin's blood boil even more. "Don't argue with me!" Armin yells back. "If you want to get caught in the crossfire, Stay!"

Eren looks down at the lands inside the walls. "Historia..." he whispers with a smile. "Trust Armin's judgment, he's never wrong. Trust his words."

Historia frowns. "Fine!" she snaps. "But if she wakes up in a cell I'm killing you, Eren." she threatens.

Hange agrees with Armin's judgment, so they let them go. All while Ymir is still unconscious. Historia puts down any offer of help before they are even voiced. Armin would have loved it if Historia simply let Armin convince Reiner to go with them.

But Armin knows better than to quarrel with the queen of the walls.

This woman was going to publicly execute him after all.

Armin takes a deep breath.

If he does reveal himself, Annie will probably jump to catch him and take him back to Marley. Based on what Zeke told him, they think he has the founder and will be killed.

Or more accurately, eaten.

Armin narrows his eyes at the scene in front of him.

Annie is still motionless. She can stay in this form for days, but Armin doesn't need days.

If Armin goes, Reiner and Annie's mission will be complete and they will leave for good. It's not like they can kill Armin, so Armin will stay with Marley too.

Maybe I can make some changes in Marley .

He looks at Eren and Mikasa as they help Historia and Ymir climb down the escalator and ride to the safety of Trost. Eren's eyes are somewhat filled with worry and that makes Armin's mouth foam and his heart beat angrily in his chest.

I can't sacrifice Historia.

I can't abandon Krista like that.

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. Changing Eren is obviously a futile attempt, maybe he'll have more luck in Marley.

And by giving himself up without a fight, Annie and Reiner will probably be too occupied to harm the scouts and simply leave back to Marley.

Armin smiles at Annie's titan. "Almost poetically good..." he whispers.

His hand raises to his hoodie.

In the first few seconds there is absolute silence. Armin becomes sure of his choice and lets the hood fall to his shoulders.

It takes a few seconds.

Then Annie is leaping at the walls.

The walls shake as she jumps on them, her hardened skin digs into the surface and her yell echoes all around the walls.

"Everyone, Switch to ODM!" Hange yells. "Others, RUN!"

"Reiner, let's go, REINER!"

All around him, a sound of click click echoes as Hange squad gets ready to fight.

Armin stays still as she climbs up.

"Don't let her climb inside!" Hange yells and Armin wants to yell.

"NO THAT'S NOT WHAT SHE'S HERE FOR!"

But Annie is faster, she climbs up the wall and Armin doesn't flinch away when she grabs him like a toy and lifts him up.

"ARMIN!!!"

Armin's eyes fall to the ground and meet Eren's jade greens who stare at him helplessly, then his eyes morph into a determined frown.

Annie's eyes lock with Reiners.

That's when Reiner understands.

In the mid air, time slows down. At that moment, Armin thinks this is the last time he'll see Eren and Mikasa in person in this life. Seconds stretch to infinity in Armin's mind.

Enough for Armin to smile at Eren.

And then wave bitterly at Mikasa.

Before earth moves from under his feet and he's pulled down the walls by Annie.

She can't be so careless in her titan form as Armin's head hits the walls as they slide down.

The impact knocks him unconscious.

The last thing he hears before the world goes black is Eren's shout and Mikasa's angry yell.

And he thinks the next moment he opens his eyes, he's probably going to Marley.

Eren watches in horror.

His blood has run cold and shock has stopped him from moving an inch. He only gasps awake when Annie puts Armin's unconscious body in her mouth and closes her lips to free her hand to fight the scouts who are attacking her.

Eren's mind Blanches.

We just have one of the warriors eat him and inherit his titan.

Eren blinks in surprise.

The fight below them isn't to get Armin back, but to simply repel the female titan. But she is ruthless. She hits Hange squad one by one to the wall or throws them around with their hooks like a yo yo.

She's planning to leave...

so Armin is still alive!

what should I do? What would Armin do? He'd stay calm, that's for sure.

Eren thinks bitterly.

and she'll leave unless--

Annie lifts her hand and hits Someone to the wall. Eren's mind stops working once he notices who she is. His eyes see a glimpse of Niffa's red hair and lifeless eyes. The same kind girl who helped

Hange around and insisted Eren take breaks between the experiments...

... Was now a stain on the wall.

"You bastard!" Eren yells and stands up. He raises his hand to bite on but Reiner stops him.

"We have an order!" Reiner yells. "We don't have ODM, we need to leave!"

"But--" Eren tries to say but he's interrupted by a loud yell.

"INCOMING!!"

Hange stops midair. They order Moblit and the rest of their squad to retreat immediately. They have a split second before Annie's head explodes.

Blood splatters around and dust rises to the sky. Eren stares at the ground. He knows this explosion pattern. He also knows that voice.

When the dust settles, Eren can see half of Annie's face is gone and her jaw is hanging open.

Petra flies around her, only holding one thunder spear in her left arm. She smirks like a madman as she turns around Annie's still titan.

"You think you'd get away from us that easily! Huh!" Petra yells and lands on her nose, a confident grin on her face. "You still have to pay us back for killing Gunther, you wrench!"

"Petra! Don't underestimate her!"

Eren's eyes follow Eld. He quickly shows up from the other side of the titan. Annie hardens her face to protect herself, even raises her hands to cover her injuries. Eld sends his thunder spear and it shatters her hardening.

Her jaw falls open.

Armin rolls down from her tongue and falls to the ground.

Olou catches him mid air. "Ugh! Disgusting!" he yells, holding unconscious Armin bridal style. He uses his ODM to climb up the wall and drop Armin unceremoniously in their safety.

"Armin!" Eren yells and runs to him in an instant. He picks him up and immediately searches for his wrist to find a pulse.

He feels a steady up and down under his fingertips. He audibly sighs and holds the other in a desperate hug.

"Eren, you! Get away from here!" Olou orders, pointing at Reiner behind Eren's back. "This'll be a battle ground soon and the female won't have mercy on you!"

Eren slowly closes his eyes. "Right." he nods. He struggles to pick up Armin bridal style, but he manages. The blond is limp in his arms, almost like he's asleep.

Eren starts moving as fast as he can towards the south, towards Trost. He hates running over the wall like this but this is his only chance. Mikasa will stay and if Mikasa is there, Eren's mind is at ease.

Eren can see her standing upright for Hange's orders.

He has a mind to stay and transform into a titan. With those rockets, they can defeat Annie just fine.

Lost in thought, Eren bumps into Reiner's stone hard figure. He steps back, an eyebrow raised as to why Reiner is staring at the female titan like that and not *running*.

"You ok, Reiner?" Eren asks out loud. His hands tighten around Armin, his body becoming alarmed.

Eren tries to walk away but a firm grip on his elbow stops him.

Eren's eyes widened. He looks at Reiner from the corner of his eyes. "Reiner..." he says, fighting to keep his calm. "I need to leave..."

"No. And No, I'm not ok." Reiner shakes his head. Eren can only see the back of his blond head. "A warrior. A warrior follows his duty until the bitter end. I have done everything except that!"

warrior .

Eren's eyes widened.

Did Reiner say--

*We just have one of the **warriors** eat him .*

Eren grinds his teeth.

No, that's impossible.

"Reiner, get out of my way." Eren demands, "Armin needs medical attention."

Reiners grip on Eren's forearm just tightens. "You look tired, Eren, why don't you let me carry Armin to our destination?"

Eren swallows hard. "Is your destination Trost?"

Silence settles between them.

A sound of explosion echoes in the air, followed by a loud roar. Reiners shoulders drop and he takes a deep breath.

Then it settles in Eren's mind.

That was Annie's roar.

Eren snaps his head to the horizon and sees a hoard of titans running towards them.

He doesn't hear Hange as they shout orders.

"Looks like I'm needed here." Reiner says. He takes off the cast from his steaming.

Eren takes a step back and clutches Armin tightly to his chest.

Reiners hand is *steaming* .

Reiner throws the bandage around. His eyes are emotionless as he offers his hand. "Let me take Armin to my destination. My home." he says. "Trust me. That'll be the best."

"Just, just what are you!?" Eren yells. He knows monsters of his kind better than anyone now. And he can say, Reiner is one.

The reliable, confident Reiner.

He is a monster of his breed.

Eren narrows his eyes. "Get away from me!" he yells. He turns around and starts running.

The air cracks behind him, he knows this sound like it's engraved into his bones. He turns around and yellow lightning invades his mind. Eren stumbles and falls to the ground, bright light flashes in front of his mind.

The next moment, he sees a giant armored hand reaching above him. It passes his body and reaches for Armin. Those fingers gently pick up Armin's limb body from the ground then fists around his body.

Eren forces his body to sit up but he falls down again. He is helpless to do anything but watch as Reiner takes Armin firmly in his hands and slides down the wall.

It shakes the foundation of the great walls.

Eren pushes himself over the edge and watch's Reiner fall with wide eyes. "First Annie and now..." Eren stares at the armor titan as it slides down the wall, his lips trembling from anger. "... now Reiner?"

Reiner has an obvious goal, to help Annie.

And Annie had an even more obvious goal, to capture Armin.

And Armin is...

Eren's eyes see Armin unconscious and lose his mind. "DIE!! You TRAITOR!!" Eren yells. He pushes himself and falls to the ground. He bites his hands hard enough for blood to splash out and lightning follows him.

His titan lands on the ground with a full body and limbs. He roars loudly at Reiner and wastes no time jumping at him.

Reiner hardens a cage on his hands for Armin, ready to fight.

Next to them, the titans Annie had summoned get dangerously close. Annie picks one up and throws it over the wall, inside the wall Rose.

Before Eren can attack him, Reiner does the same thing, throwing titans inside wall Rose to create diversion within the scouts.

Eren wants to attack but light feet land on his shoulder, he looks at her and notices its Mikasa. She kneels down, narrowing her eyes. "Orders from Hange. You'll have to fight Reiner Alone while Levi's squad handles Annie. The rest of us have to handle the titans they just threw inside and Eren--"

Mikasa swallows hard. "... They might try to kidnap you too. Be careful." she says.

Eren nods his head.

Mikasa jumps back and disappears on the other side of the walls.

Reiner holds up his hand in front of Eren, ready to fight. Eren fists of his own.

"Annie can harden her skin..." Eren thinks in his titan. "Maybe if I concentrate hard enough..."

He growls angrily when he fists his titan hands and nothing happens.

Guess we'll have to fight bare handed.

Eren attacks with a loud roar.

It was in the middle of battle that Eren noticed his titan lacked its usual strength.

Perhaps he had taken it too far with those prototypes, maybe his body did have a limit.

What he knows is that he hated the feeling of failure. He hates Reiner standing on top of him. He hated the feeling of knowing his enemy had won.

it's the end, Eren, you lost the fight.

It's something Eren doesn't hear but knows Reiner has thought of.

Reiner turns around in his titan and Eren is powerless to stop him.

He gathers his thoughts and lets his body start steaming. His titan body bursts into steam. It explodes and gives Eren enough cover.

He won't let Reiner and Annie take Armin to wherever they are from.

he won't!

On the other side, Annie is having trouble keeping up with Levi's squad as they burst whichever part of her body she tried to rebuild or

harden.

"You wanna leave?! Not so soon, dipshit." Olou yells. "We have a head to take back to Gunther's family.

"And you know Levi squad, we never make a mistake twice." Eld declares.

They kept their distance with her. Their leader, Eld yelled at Oluo and Petra if they got in Annie's arm. No matter how good Annie was at hand to hand, it was useless if they never got closer than an arm's length.

She protected her nape with her hand and she tried to dodge the rocket's attacks. They only have one left and they are not skilled with it as they are with blades.

So Annie waits for them to waste it.

But they don't.

The moment she notices Eld's shouts have subsided she feels an explosion in the back of her nape, her dislocated wrist falls to the ground and leaves her nape exposed.

"NOW!"

Petra and Oluo don't allow her to come back from her shock, they take out their blades and attack her neck.

The female titans head falls to the ground with a loud thud.

Annie's lost mobility and her senses.

Her heart stops beating in her chest, she has lost her titan senses or the feeling of her titan body.

Outside, Petra yells in triumph.

"This is for Gunther!" Eld yells, signaling at the others to attack the headless titan.

All three of them use the wall to climb up as high as they can. Using the momentum of their fall, they decide to rip the female titans neck at the same time.

They fall, ready to strike, but the moment their blade comes in contact with the female titans skin, it bursts into a cloud of steam and hardened titan.

The shock wave sends Eld, Oluo and Petra back.

Oluo's impact to the wall is the loudest. It makes a large crack, and Eld's leg is bent in odd shapes. Only Petra manages to land somewhat gracefully.

Petra yells for the two but Eld orders her to take a look at Annie. Petra pushes herself on her feet and walks towards the steaming mess of the female titan.

Petra's eyes fall closed, her lip twitching in annoyance when she sees Annie inside a protective shell. Petra says, nonchalantly. She raises her blade and hits the crystal, once and her blade snaps in half.

"She... She has crystallized herself." Petra yells back.

Petra growls angrily. Before Eld can stop her, Petra jumps using his ODM to gain more momentum and tries cutting the crystal while falling.

Nothing happens, her blade snaps in half and Petra is left shocked beyond belief.

Eld grinds his teeth. "You, stop it." he orders. "We're injured, no need to make our state any worse. Look at Oluo! If we don't hurry he'll die and I'll lose my foot and--"

Eld is interrupted by a loud yell coming from the horizon.

Eld and Petra, along with everyone inside the walls, have to cover their ears from the intensity of it. They can only assume it's from a titan shifter.

Petra looks up. The armor has stopped its march. He's standing, frozen and torn between two choices.

The choice is made when Hange Squad lands on the walls. Hange themselves and point their blade at them. "Get the armored titan!" they yell. "If we don't stop him he'll keep throwing titans inside our walls!"

Reiner looks at the squad who jumped from the wall, Annie's Crystal, and the place the sound came from.

Reiner runs away.

"Where'd you think you're going!?" Mikasa yells. She flies after him with her ODM gear. With no thunder spears, she can cut through his armor but she manages to turn around him and stab his eyeballs.

The armored lets out a roar and pushes her away. She falls to the ground,

In a split second, her eyes see something, she catches something she never thought she would.

"Eren!?"

Mikasa falls to the ground. Her body rolls on the dirt from the impact a few times before she stands up to follow them.

"Don't follow him." Hange order stops her from moving.

"Why!?" she turns around and yells back.

Hange waves their blade. "The beast might be nearby and he's gotten too far. You'll just get yourself killed if you follow him!"

Mikasa grinds her teeth angrily.

Eren... Armin... She thinks as she looks into the distance.

I hope you know what you're doing.

Mikasa regroups with the survivors as she's ordered.

Eren has greatly overestimated his ability to hang on.

His hands and fingers hold on to Reiners broken shards of hardened titan skin. He keeps himself as steady as he can with Reiner running so fast.

He's sweating, and it's making it harder to hang on but Eren knows he can do it. He's hanging Reiners back, the easiest place he could get to.

Eren grinds his teeth together in pain when some of the shards dig into his hands and draw blood.

"You're not..."

Eren holds on to Reiner armor harder.

"... taking Armin..."

His hands ache, he's been holding himself up here for an hour now, but he has to hold on until Reiner stops.

His jade eyes burn with determination.

"**ANYWHERE !**"

Eren ain't letting you leave, Armin.

Good news! The next few chapters with focus solely on EREMIN!
Our boys will be all alone in thr woods for a few days in titan land
trying to get back home... Hmmm... I wonder if someone will
confess :)

Please leave a COMMENT or a kudos to make the author happy!

Find a more noble cause to sacrifice your life

...

Chapter 12: Find a more noble cause to sacrifice your life for.

Armin wants to leave.

Eren won't let Reiner just take Armin.

Zeke doesn't know anything.

And Armin finally understands the why Historia is important in Eren's life.

First of all, sorry but Armin in Marley arc is... Far from now. But I can assure you he will go to Marley! After all, that's where the other side of the story is happening!

And secondly! This chapter is a little short because I couldn't get the hang of the last scene so I added it to the next chapter, hopefully, that'll be better.

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

people being eaten, Blood injury, heart attacks. (But no character death)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Reiner stops to a halt near a forest.

Eren uses that chance to jump off of his steaming titan body and climb on a tree. He keeps himself as hidden as he can.

While Reiner clearly has the advantage, Eren has to succeed.

Otherwise this might be the last time he'll ever get to see Armin's face again.

Reiner brings Armin's body down to a thick branch. Reiner's hazel eyes stare at Armin's body for a few seconds, especially at his gravely bleeding forehead. Reiner opens his mouth and says words that only work to confuse Eren further.

"Why isn't he steaming...?"

Eren blinks in surprise.

How dare Reiner compare Armin to the monster likes of him! Armin is no titan-- no monster-- why does he expect him to steam?

However, Eren doesn't have much time to wonder why.

A few seconds later, the area is shaking by the echoing footsteps of a titan coming from inside the forest. Eren narrows his eyes. Whoever it may be, it's trouble.

Eren may somehow be able to fight Reiner off and take Armin back but he can't if Reiner has an ally.

Eren grinds his teeth and his mind works for a plan.

Reiner didn't know why Zeke screamed.

Even after so long, he can recognise the distressed voice of Zeke Yeager from so much afar. It's as rare as it's terrifying to hear Zeke

call for help or summon them but he had. And Reiner had to leave Annie in that god forsaken crystal to come for him.

The echoing footsteps calmed Reiner down enough for his shoulders to fall down. He didn't remove his eyes from Armin, who was thankfully knocked out, and closed his eyes with a sigh.

Home.

He can finally go--

A death grip on his neck pulled him back. Reiner gasped in surprise but a stronger arm was cutting off his airway. The other arm reached for his ODM and pulled out a blade.

"Don't move."

Reiner recognises the voice.

Eren growls angrily in his ear. Then, he keeps the new blade securely under his throat. "Which do you think is faster? Me stabbing you or you transforming?" he whispers, venom dropping from his voice.

Reiner blinks in surprise. "Er-Eren. How the hell did you--"

Eren holds the blade closer, the blade makes a wound on Reiner's throat. "You don't feel your armor as good as you feel your skin, do you?" Eren whispers back. "You have to. Because you didn't notice I was clinging to your armor this entire time."

The footsteps get closer to them little by little. Reiner's attempt at escape doesn't seize. Eren looks back from the corner of his eyes and sees none other than the beast titan approaching them.

Eren narrows his eyes.

He looks down at the titans clawing at the tree they were standing on.

And the beast titan is getting closer and closer. Now, Eren can see his long hands and ugly figure. He clicks his tongue angrily.

Apparently, there exist monsters worse than him.

He sighs loudly.

He removes the blade from Reiner's throat, and stabs him in his side before Reiner could do much else.

"Defend yourself well, Reiner, I know this won't kill you." Are the last words Eren says before he kicks the other down.

Eren jumps for Armin's body immediately. He has to turn into a titan and run straight back to the walls.

Hopefully, this beast titan will choose to help Reiner and that'll give Eren enough time to run away.

Eren had miscalculated, because Zeke doesn't flinch. Instead, a smile comes up to his face. "You must be Eren Yeager right."

Eren's hand freezes moments before he bites them.

He stares at the beast titan with wide, horrified eyes and--

Eren hums. *Annie must have told him .*

Eren ignores that he looks down and sees the titans are completely ignoring Reiner and instead, they all have their eyes on him.

And the beast titan... He is reaching one of his long, hairy hands for Armin.

Eren's nonexistent heart beats maddeningly in his chest until he's jumped over and protecting Armin's body with his own. Cradling the unconscious boy's body tight enough that the beast titan couldn't reach him.

The moment he feels the touch of the titan behind him, the world shifts around him.

Yellow lightning passes his eyes and memories assault his mind.

Memories of his childhood. Of his father and mother.

Memories of the first time he met Armin after those bullies had left him crying.

Memories of Mikasa and the kidnappers.

Memories from the cadet days, from before he knew he was a monster.

Eren gasps awake. When his eyes open fully, his mind is still dizzy, he has to let go of Armin's body just to grab his own head and scream at the top of his lungs to make the throbbing in the back of his eyes go away.

Where is he?

Why can't his eyes see nothing but a heavy blur.

He feels a heavy hand on his shoulder. He shakes it off and keeps screaming, his ears start to protest against the sounds he himself is making.

"Eren... breathe..." a kind voice whispers in his ears.

who...?

Slowly, whatever pain there was in the back of Eren's mind fades away. He's left with numb limbs and a burning throat. When his senses come together, he notices he's fallen on the ground. Eren's eyes see a starless night sky with colorful bright branches spreading as far as he could see.

And of course, there is a face in front of him.

"Take deep breaths." the face says. "It'll make it easier."

Eren's tired eyes focus on the face and he sees a pair of glasses, dark hair and eyes identical to his own.

His breath catches in his throat. "D-dad?"

The face transforms. It keeps his fathers facial structure but his hair color changes to blond and his eyes to gray.

"I'm afraid not... My name is Zeke yeager."

yeager?

Eren feels his body enough to jump back and put some distance between him and this new man. That's when he notices there is sand all around him and no sign of the jungle they were in before. "Armin--where is--"

Eren looks at his own body and decides to stand up, he looks right at this giant glowing tree and the branches that look endless.

He shuts his eyes. "Armin..." he whispers, looking down at the man who introduced himself as Zeke. "Armin, where is Armin?"

Zeke rubs his chin. He is sitting on the ground with no care in the world. "Can't you see him? Right now you have all the power in the world but can't see right behind you."

Eren turns around.

Zeke is right, Armin is laying on the cold sand. He looked just as he did moments ago other than the fact that the blood on his forehead had dried and his chest was rising and falling in a more steady rhythm.

Eren kneels down next to him, he immediately searches for a pulse on Armin's next and finds one, steady and strong. He lets out a long sigh and falls back on his elbows in relief.

No... Not yet...

Eren faces Zeke with the angriest glare he can. "Where are we?" he asks. "And what do you mean by *all the power in the world*?"

Zeke narrows his eyes at Eren almost curiously. "Has our father not told you?" he asks.

"*our father*?? What the hell." he snaps angrily. "Is that why you're a yeager? Dad can't be a monster like you!"

Zeke tilts his head. "You truly have no idea.."

"About what?"

"I'll explain everything once you summon founder Ymir and I make all my planning bear fruit." Zeke says seriously. "I'll explain everything to you, little bro--"

"I'm not your brother!" Eren yells. "And I have no idea who this Ymir fellow is."

"I would reconsider if I were you..." Zeke whispers. "I know we never had time to know each other but--"

"I don't even want to know you!" Eren drops and grips Zeke by the collar of his white uniform. "Get us back!"

"You need to summon Ymir first. Although she only obeys ones of royal blood, my key to finding her is you."

"So you think you're like a king or something."

Zeke hums. "I wouldn't go that far. But if you're going to play like this, I can play dirty too, little brother." Zeke's eyes fall to Armin's unconscious body. "He looks important to you, right?"

Eren grinds his teeth and pulls Zeke's collar harder. "I'll kill you before you can even think about it."

"I might need Founder Ymir for my grand plan but the paths will still obey me if I order Armin's death, you know." Zeke says as a matter of fact.

Eren's jade green eyes burn with anger. "Don't even think about trying it."

Zeke holds up his hand, ready to snap. "So? What is it gonna be, Eren?" Zeke asks. "He looks precious to you. And his life depends on a snap of my finger--"

Wind blows past Zeke's hand and the hand he was threatening Eren with crumbles to dust and sand.

Zeke screams in agony, then his entire body falls to the ground and still into a sand statue.

It happens fast, Eren had no time to blink. One moment, Zeke was threatening him and the next, he's a still sand statue on agonizing pain of having his right hand blown to dust.

Eren's eyes widen, his jaw drops.

"Pathetic..."

A new voice enters their ears.

In an instant, sand rises into a statue of a man and someone steps out from it. "Pathetic..." he repeats, he pushes his hands into his pockets, his shoulder length chocolate brown hair dances in the wind that makes the sands build his body. He steps closer to the two and when he's close enough, Eren can see his own eyes staring back at him.

He is older, maybe in his late teens or early twenties.

The older chuckles, laughing mockingly.

Then his eyes turn to Zeke's body. "I took you for a self-loathing fool, but this? This is a whole other level." he smirks. "*brother* ."

brother!?

Eren bites his tongue when expressing that out loud. Every moment becomes more confusing than the last. He doesn't want to anger whoever this new man was, although all he wanted was to punch him until he agreed to end this nightmare.

The man shakes his head. "And you-- are apparently still an idiot." he whispers.

Eren frowns. "Who are you, now?" he asks, unable to keep the annoyance in his tone.

The man turns around. "I'm you." is what he says. "Give or take a few mistakes."

Eren steps back. "What!? How's that even possible!?"

The man doesn't answer. Instead, he pushes his hands in his pockets and starts walking over to Armin's body. Eren is too paralyzed to stop him.

The Eren of the paths kneels down next to Armin's body, he takes a fistful of the sand under his feet and lets it fall over Armin's forehead. "This boy is too much of a genius for his own sake." Eren of the paths whispers as he puts some sand over Armin's head. "Over and over. He has no idea how hard it is..."

He brushes a strand of Armin's hair away from his face. His eyes softened. "It leaves me wondering. When will he come back? What'll happen then? What if I didn't heal him good enough."

Eren swallows hard. "Are you... Healing him?" he asks.

Eren of the paths nods. "That's the point, yes."

Eren licks his lips.

He can't stop his curiosity. He kneels down a little further from Armin's body and his older self. The older man's hands move so tenderly over Armin's face, and Armin's body slowly stitches itself back together.

If that wasn't proof enough of how much the older person cares about Armin.

Eren tilts his head. "Are-- Are you really the older me?"

"Yes and No."

"What does that mean?"

"It means what it means."

Eren huffs. "You're even grumpier than Captain Levi." he hums. "You know I-- what are you doing? Can I do that? Can I heal people like that?"

Eren doesn't wait for the older Eren's answer. He reaches for some sand and holds it above the last wound on Armin's forehead. But the older Eren suddenly grabs his hand to stop him. The grip hurts, Eren wants to complain but no voice leaves his lips.

He freezes, then yellow lightning transfers a fragment of a memory into his mind.

He sees a giant skeleton titan, with an army of colossals at his side. He sees nothing but this fragment and the emotions that come with it. The bitter taste of success as his enemies died, crushed under his feet.

It's an eerily familiar feeling, one much like the one he felt in Trost, when he got to stump a titan to death.

Eren's eyes focus on the olders identical eyes and connect the dots. "Do you--" a smile slips through his lips. "You'll eradicate them all!"

The older Eren shuts his eyes with a hushed growl of "shut up..."

"I saw it!" Eren stands up to his feet, his body floods with different emotions of success and happiness. "You killed our enemies! You killed all the titans didn't you!? Those were our enemies and you wiped them all out!"

"Shut up." is the olders only reply.

But Eren doesn't, his eyes widen as he babbles the next words. "Will I ever be as powerful as you?"

That makes the Eren of the paths stop.

He slowly turns around, sand falls from between his fingertips and rolls down his body to the ground. He hums.

Eren sighs loudly. "I... Should I not have asked that?"

The olders lips spread into a smirk. "No. You'll be stronger. Not because you're physically stronger, but because this time you won't be alone." he says simply.

Eren blinks in surprise. "What... What do you mean?" he whispers.

The Eren of the paths goes back to his work over Armin's body. "Don't push it."

"If-- If the titan I saw was really yours then-- then why are you here? Why don't you exterminate the titans right now!" Eren yells. "You're me, aren't you? Don't you want to do that!?"

Eren arches an eyebrow.

He wipes a handful of sand over Armin's face and the sand fades into his skin. Armin's chest rises in a gasp but his eyes don't open. "I

can't use any of the founders powers. For reasons I can't disclose with you, I'm stuck here as Ymir's subordinate." he says. "In other words... Her slave. Dedicated to the same curse she is until the time is up."

"Who is this Ymir!?" Eren's eyes widened. "Are you--"

"But you aren't Armin. So I have some freedom of choice in your regards. Well, until she notices your presence and comes up with another shitty excuse to twist Armin's deal in her favor." Eren of the paths says. "So shoo. I don't have time for you. If you want to use the founder, use it locally without the paths."

"What deal!?" Eren yells. "What is this nonsense!? You mean that-that giant skeletal titan!?!?" Eren's jaw falls open. "You mean I can make that!? I- I can use that power? What do you mean locally?"

Eren of the paths blinks in surprise. "Oh, you don't know...? Of course you don't. You won't until you get fathers memories." He smirks. "Well, ymir is close. So listen, No, you can't access the powers of the paths without a titan of royal blood. But don't ever let this man have physical contact with you again."

Eren of the paths points at Zeke to emphasize on his words.

Eren arches an eyebrow with a chuckle.

"Why? you just said I can't use it without him--"

"You got shit lucky this time! If he hadn't hurt Armin and I wasn't summoned he could have done whatever he wanted with the founders powers!! and you could have done nothing but watch!" the Older Eren yells.

Eren of the patha stands up to his feet. "But if you really want to use the founders' powers-- I'll send someone to help you. When you're in the founder but not in paths, only the titans that can hear your scream will obey you. But once you get into paths, which is here by

the way, every single one of them in existence will obey you. The downside is, the royal titan won't let you do as you please."

Eren of the paths suddenly takes his shoulders and shakes him roughly. Eren opens his eyes and he's staring deep into identical jade green eyes. "Shit, Ymir knows you're here."

"Who is this Ymir!?" Eren asks again.

Eren if the path turns him around to the tree. Eren squints his eyes just to see a young girl standing in the tree.

He is yanked back by his older self. "You won't remember anything I'm telling you right now. Probably never will remember until it's too late. Ymir won't let you. But I know myself. Your resolve is stronger than Ymir's will to erase any contact we ever had. If you remember nothing, try to remember this--"

Eren opens his eyes in shock. "What are you..."

Wind blows past his face.

He doesn't need to be told what the feeling means to understand it.

He is leaving the paths.

"The third day of fall. Year 854." Eren of the paths says, a hint of desperation in his voice. "Keep that date engraved in your mi--"

Eren falls.

"Armin!"

Armin stirs in his oblivion.

The word part about waking up, is the point when you can't deny the solidity of the world around you anymore.

The tree bark under his fingertips becomes too solid and little by little, he feels the small spikes digging into the back of his head and the dirt in his hair.

And of course, he recognises the owner of that voice.

"Armin! Wake up!"

He obeys.

He slowly opens his eyes and Eren's face is exactly in the middle of his field of vision. His jade eyes soften when their eyes meet for a fraction of a second.

And then Eren dives into his embrace, he holds Armin's body too tightly, he gasps to take a breath.

Eren lets go immediately. "Oh, sorry!" Eren whispers, holding up his hands in defense. "You're awake! I need to-- we need to move."

Armin rubs the side of his face.

For the first time, Armin feels unfortunate that the scouts have somehow won against the warriors. He was hoping he'd wake up in Marley but--

"Let's run to somewhere less dense with titan, I'll transform there!" Eren yells. "Can you walk?"

Armin blinks in surprise. "Why... Why do we need to run?" he asks.

The smile falls from Eren's face.

Armin remembers where he is. He looks at the tree bark he was sitting on in horror and then around himself. Armin's eyes move over the green leaves of the giant trees over to the giant titan on the ground.

Armin gasps and jumps a step back. "WHAT THE--"

Armin snaps his head at Eren. "How?? What happened?" he yells.

Eren rubs the back of his neck. "I-- uh... After you were taken. Hange ordered retreat but I was already clinging to Reiners armor so I... Kinda tagged along with him..." he trails off.

Armin runs his hands through his hair. "You thought you could take on three titans on your own!!" he yells angrily. "When you were exhausted and couldn't transform properly ONCE!?"

Eren sighs. "Well, Annie never showed up and--"

Eren shakes his head.

"Forget about this! They're both knocked out for some reason and we need to leave before we run out of luck!" Eren whispers, "can you run or walk or climb or anything?"

Armin looks down at his legs, they seem alright so he nods and stands up. "The titans are all frozen?" Armin whispers as he observes.

Eren nods as he takes Armin's hand and he pushes Armin to follow him. They run to the end of the branch and jump to another. The impact injures Armin's knee but he swallows his shout and runs after Eren.

Armin looks at the beast titans steaming body.

Damm it. I could have done some real good deeds in Marley.

Eren holds his hands tightly. "Zeke is controlling the titans locally, once we get out of the range of his scream, all the pure titans will attack us like they always do." Eren shouts. "I'll transform there and run to safety."

Armin blinks in surprise, they jump from the nearest branch to another, shocked. "Eren... How do you know this?"

Eren stops. He looks back, confusion written all over his face. "I... I don't know..." he hums.

Armin arches an eyebrow. "You don't know?"

Eren blinks again. "I... I don't really know... But we need to get back to the walls." Eren yells. He pulls Armin's hand to follow him again. "New plan. We'll spend the rest of the day on these trees until nightfall, then we can move without the fear of the titans." Eren says. "Sounds good?"

Armin shuts his eyes and nods.

"Yeah... That sounds much more reasonable."

"Eren... I think we have made a miscalculation." Armin whispers as he looks down at the ground.

Little by little, it becomes more and more evident.

Although the moon is shining, it's a full circle tonight and the titans seem to be moving alright. Armin wants to curse his luck.

Both Eren and Armin can't help but look down at the ground, where more and more titans gather to claw at the poor tree they've climbed up.

Beads of sweat slowly gather over Armin's face. This tree won't hang for much longer.

The tree shakes.

Blue eyes meet green and they silently reach a middle ground.

Eren jumps, as wounded and exhausted as he is, he bites into his hand and miraculously forms a fully functioning attack titan.

It roars and Armin clings to the tree as hard as he can. He shuts his eyes and braces himself for impact of the titans fight. Sounds of bloodied punches and broken bones echo in the air, until Armin hears a loud roar.

Armin looks down, in between the steaming pile of titans, Eren holds up his open palm for Armin to jump in.

Armin shuts his eyes and throws himself down into the arms of a titan that once tried to eat him.

Eren holds him with both hands, like he would hold water between his fingers.

Eren's titan runs.

He closes his hands to keep Armin secure when he bumps into titans but he keeps running north, as much as he can. Armin can't see the walls between the cracks of Eren's finger.

It's cold but the titan radiates warmth like a furnace all around the blond.

Until Eren's hands start to shake, and Armin understands that his limit is fastly approaching.

Armin taps his fingers. "Eren..." he whispers. "Eren, it's time to stop, you're hurting yourself."

Eren slowly stops. He opens his hand and Armin has a chance to look up at the exhausted titan. Armin didn't know titans could have wrinkles or dark eyebags, but seeing them on Eren's face made something twist in Armin's guts.

"We can run the rest of the way to safety," he says, standing up to his feet. "Put me down so we can start moving. Keeping the titan is putting so much strain in your bodi--AGH!"

Eren's titan falls to the ground and it immediately starts to steam.

Armin barely manages to land on his feet and run away just enough not to be crushed under the titans body. Armin looks up at the nape of the titan. "Eren!?" he yells, a figure slowly pulls itself out of the titans' nape. "Eren!!" he yells a little louder.

Eren stands up from his titans body, his face looks ever more hollow than it did before, deep dark eyebags and bleeding titan marks merging his skin.

He failed to take one more step before he slipped and fell right to the muddied ground.

Panicked, Armin rushes to his side. "Eren!" he yells and kneels down. He rolls Eren to lay on his back and gently slaps his bloodied cheeks a few times. "Eren, Eren, open your eyes!"

Eren slowly opens his eyes. His eyes look darker, life sucked out of them after these tiresome few days. Armin smiles softly. "It's ok. You did your best. We're safe enough here." Armin whispers as he pulls eren into a hug.

Eren's eyes drift to the skies. "... We're not..." he whispers. "I... I failed..."

Armin shuts his eyes, then opens them. "You didn't fail." he says. Both of his hands cup Eren's face and force the brunet to meet his eyes. "You hear me, Eren. You didn't fail--"

although I would appreciate it if you didn't ruin all my plans--

"--I can't watch you do this to yourself anymore! What are you going to prove by overworking yourself to--"

The earth shakes.

Both snap their head at the direction the sound is coming from. Armin's eyes widen, Eren fists his hands and forces his body to stand up, he falls and has to lean on Armin for support.

The titan, a titan that was previously sleeping, stands up to its feet and starts moving towards them, its rotten yellowed teeth spread to a smile and blond hair cut in shoulder length hair.

Armin recognises this titan, so does Eren.

Even in his state, Eren is the first one who stands up and starts to walk away, pulling Armin after him.

The titans footstep shakes the ground.

"Hurry!!"

Eren's yell snaps Armin back to reality.

Eren's tired eyes narrow. "You run," he says. "You run as fast as you can, don't stay back for me."

Armin grinds his teeth.

Another dangerously close footstep, he can feel the titan reach its hand for them.

"NO! Not without you!" Armin whispers, pulling Eren to start running faster. "I can't run much faster anyway and I--"

Eren tackles Armin to the ground, the titans hand misses Armin's face by an inch.

They roll on the ground, but the titan doesn't stop. Eren's weak hold on Armin's body is possessive, keeping him hidden from the titans view. "You- you saved us from this titan once, I think it's my time to return the favor."

Armin blinks in surprise, his heart hammers in his chest when the titan stops exactly above them and reaches for them, of course, it wraps around Eren's body first.

Armin never thought he'd have an especially hated pure titan, but the titan of Dina Fritz is coming threateningly close.

Her fingers wrap around Eren's body and he slowly loosens his arms around Armin.

"Once it gets to me, start running as fast as you can..."

Eren's voice makes Armin's heart skip a beat.

And then, a tear falls on Armin's cheek.

Armin is too frozen to take his eyes off of Dina Fritz and the death grip she is having on Eren's body.

Another tear falls on Armin's face.

The titan stops.

And Eren slowly lifts his head and covers Armin's view. "I'm sorry..." he whispers, when their eyes meet, Eren's eyes are a purple mess of tears between his titan scars and eyebags.

Tears roll down his chin and fall into Armin's face, his eyes widen and he can do nothing but stare.

Dina Fritz is completely frozen.

And Eren has purple eyes which means--

but he's not ordering the titans to--

Does Eren--

Does he think this is the end?

"I'm sorry--I'm sorry we didn't get to see the ocean."

The words make Armin's mind forget about Dina Fritz, or the paths, or the founder. Now it was just the two of them, with Eren smiling between his tears. He reaches his hand to push a strand of blond hair away from Armin's face.

"If I was a normal person- if I wasn't a monster- maybe we could have." he whispers, he swallows hard, his eyes slowly dry, having no more tears to offer, other than silent pleading. "I know you don't like me, but get to the ocean for me, ok?"

Armin jumps to say something but Eren is faster. He leans up and kisses his forehead. "It's ok. I don't love me either." he whispers.

He pulls back to smile. "Thank you for letting me live this dream." he whispers. "You were the best dream I ever had."

Just as he says that, Dina Fritz starts to move. Her grip tightens around Eren and she slowly picks him up.

Eren doesn't resist.

Armin's mind catches up to reality shamefully late.

Eren wants to sacrifice himself for me!

that's Why he unconsciously ordered the titan to stop! Otherwise-- Otherwise--

he wants to die!

Before rational thinking could kick in, his emotions did. Before Eren could slip from his grasp, Armin wrapped his hands around Eren's neck securely.

is that why Eren respected Historia so much?

back then... She didn't ignore it like Mikasa and I did...

and now...

It's because she is the only one who saw through the facade of his self destruction?

Armin feels stupid. Too stupid to explain with words.

"Armin-- what are you doing!?" Eren yells. Dina Fritz has no problem lifting both of them off the ground. Armin narrows his eyes and keeps his hands and feet clinging to Eren and the titans hand.

"Listen to me, Eren. And listen carefully." Armin whispers. He pulls back just enough to rest their foreheads against each other. "None of this-- I accept none of this!"

One of his hands raises to run between chocolate brown locks, blue eyes filled with determination. "You wanna die here? Fine." he whispers, the smell of a titans mouth becomes disgustingly clearer as Dina Fritz opens her mouth. "Find a more noble cause to sacrifice yourself for, I'm not it."

Armin smiles.

"I'm not losing you to your stupid self destruction this time." he whispers. "Either we both see the ocean, or none of us will."

Blood splatters to the skies as Dina Fritz closes her titan mouth.

The news of the scouts on yet another scouting mission with no clear goal hits Trosts gossip in the heart of it. People talk, people whisper, people swear that the scouts are hiding something.

The restaurant where Oswin Arlert works, is currently at its height of being crammed with people. They want to get the first hand news and with the supplies of families slowly running out, people turn to the restaurants for substance.

Even Keith Shadis is here, and sometimes, the old Mr Arlert wonders if Carla and him are a couple, with Keith's constant presence and the

way Carla changed the subject when they talked about this particular matter in their afternoon teas, Oswin Arlert won't be surprised if they are.

He is going back to the storage room to bring more flour for the kitchen when he hears it. The news.

It's a small group of middle-aged men who are talking along the street. About how the scouts were "caught off guard with no ODM" or "being attacked by the female, beast and armored at the same time."

Oswin tries to keep himself calm, he knows that if anything had happened to his grandson he probably would have been the first to be told.

But the last one delivers the blow. "It's been two days, more than forty eight hours I think. They probably should start alerting the poor families of the missing people"

Oswin Arlert isn't a man that can be shaken this easily, but somehow Armin's choice of career had made him age a couple of decades since five years ago.

He keeps his calm, he does.

Until it crumbles when Mikasa Ackerman walks into the restaurant.

And she's alone.

Is she here to tell him Armin is missing or most likely dead?

It happens suddenly.

One moment Mr Arlert is standing upright and the next his left side is burning, cramped and on fire. He bends down in pain and has to lean against the wall to prevent himself from falling down.

He can't breathe.

And suddenly, it feels like his heart isn't beating anymore either. His hand curls over his heart, he barely makes a sound as he falls.

He knows the symptoms of a heart attack.

A word leaves his mouth before the world goes black.

Armin...

"OSWIN!"

It's Carla who brings Keith. Keith starts CPR and their faces are the last thing the old man sees before the dark wings of unconsciousness grab him away.

Don't worry, y'all. We need a bit more of grandpa alert for Armin's development yet!

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

A dream comes true.

Chapter 13: A dream comes true.

Heads up! This is going to be a pretty short chapter!

I'm going on a vacation!!! With my friend!! So updates going to be slow for the next two weeks annnnnd please let me know what you think of my writing style in the comments because I'm starting to think it's getting and don't know what to do about it!!

Meanwhile- enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Erwin moves his piece, the knight threatens his king again. For the third time in this match, Jean has completely given up on winning against the commander until now.

"Checkmate..."

He can't surpass an angry sigh that leaves his lips.

"What's wrong, Jean?" Erwin asks, leaning forward on the table.

"You're barely concentrating on this game, and I thought this would help you unwind after all that paperwork."

There is a lot of things he can tell the commander. Stuck between his gaze and his sharp eyes, Jean can do nothing but tell the truth. "I'm thinking..." Jean swallows hard. "If I... If I hadn't-- well, Armin and Eren would be here right now."

"You mean if you had lied to your superior?" Erwin completes for him.

Jean stays quiet.

"Understand this, Jean. Titan shifters and their biology, although very important for our victory, are still an unknown variable. Something we can't risk everything for." he explains. "How sure are you that Eren wasn't initially working for the armored and the colossal?"

Erwin moves his peace and leans back.

"And with what Ymir has revealed recently... About titans being humans... That complicates things even further."

"I understand." Jean shakes his head. "From the superiors perspective, it's rational. But still--"

"Ymir said the titans are made from injecting a special content into humans. And that she was a pure titan until she got to eat someone of the nine intelligent titans." Erwin recites. "But you do understand that some of what she said needs proof, correct?"

Jean opens his mouth to say something but commander Erwin beats him to it. He takes a bishop and holds it up. "And we need to prove what she said to be true... Before we'll have to sacrifice herself to a random pure titan to prove this little theory of hers."

Erwin looks directly into Jean's eyes. "Somebody has to, before we're ordered to kill her from the higher ups."

Jean's eyes widened.

Does... Does Commander Erwin want us to prove it?

Erwin knocks his bishop and puts his horse in the square. "Or else... We'll find ourselves in a checkmate." he finishes.

Jean closes his eyes with a sigh.

For the next day, the silent command hung heavy in Jean's mind.

Erwin could have done everything himself. However, with no solid proof, he's going to be the subject of questioning from the nobles. Which leaves his hands officially tied.

Not these squads, However.

Him, Connie, Sasha, Historia and an Angry Mikasa were assigned the new Hange squad after the previous one was slaughtered by Annie and Reiner.

Since the formation of the squad, Neither of them were in the mood to chat. Considering each of them had witnessed their squad being killed. Except Historia, who kept asking for news about Ymir and the top secret cell they kept her in.

(Jean heard her silent cries coming from the girls dorm when he was deprived of sleep last night.)

They are clearly under constant supervision. It is clear from the way there are too many guards around the compound and section-commander Hange has yet to assign them a mission.

Jean makes up his mind when all of them, except Mikasa, are silently checking up their ODM gear for maintenance. He makes up his mind when Connie opens his mouth and asks: "so, how long are we going to stay here, Jean?"

Jean blinks in surprise. "Er- why do you ask?"

Connie takes his eyes off of his ODM Motors. "You don't know either, do you? Or else you would have just said it."

"I don't--"

"You work with commander Erwin, for crying out loud. If anyone knows what happening it should be you..." Connie sighs loudly. "I mean-- I mean considering what Ymir said about origins of the titans..."

Connie trails off, he doesn't dare finish the words.

Jean puts a hand on his shoulder. He tries his best to ignore Historia who kept her ears sharp at their conversation but doesn't involve herself. He clears his throat. "It's quite alright, if What Ymir said about pure titans and intelligent titans, that also means there is a way to bring your mother back, right?"

Connie shakes his head. "Yeah yeah." he says dismissively. *"if it's true.. ."*

"IT'S TRUE!"

The three of them look around to see Historia after her outburst. She narrows her eyes dangerously angrily at the three of them. "Ymir is telling the truth and all she knows!"

Jean takes a deep calming breath. "We know that, Historia."

"Then freaking act like it." She growls. "You- all of you! Commander Hange and Erwin and Levi and EVERYONE!"

She points her finger at them.

"You all keep finding more and more reasons to keep her caged while she has done nothing!" She yells. "Especially you-- Jean, You-- don't think I don't know about what you did to Eren and Armin. I bet you're doing the same to keep Ymir in a cell, right?"

Connie and Sasha exchange a look from the corner of their eyes.

Jean looks down for a moment. "Historia--"

"Ymir overheard it from the guards." She snaps. "You were the one who accused Armin of helping the female escape! You are the reason the scouts believe Eren and Armin to be not worth saving and put so much suspicion over Ymir!"

Clank .

Historia snaps her head towards the sound. It is the echoing sound of an entire set of ODM gear clashing to the ground. Mikasa stands in the doorway. The look in her stormy gray eyes transformed from one of horror into anger.

Jean swallows hard, he holds his hands up. "I... Can explain..." he whispers.

"What..." Mikasa says through grit teeth. "What have you done??"

Sasha jumps in the middle, she stands between Jean and Mikasa with a small smile on her face. "Hey, Hey, Mikasa it's no--"

"What have you done!" Mikasa yells again.

A devilish smile appears on Historias face. "Yeah, *explain* ." she laughs.

"Hey! Just because your girlfriend is in a cell doesn't give you a right to be mean!" Connie yells at her. "Ok, everyone-- let's give him a chance to explain himself and--"

"Explain what?" Mikasa yells, throwing her hands into the air.

"Explain what!? What sort of explanation is going to help me break the news to my mother, *again* !" She bites her tongue and shakes her head. "What was I expecting from a selfish bastard like you, anyway!"

"I'm sorry--"

Sasha stands between Mikasa and Jean, purely to keep her from punching him. Her chest rises and falls as she tries to calm herself

down and fails. "What else have you been doing behind our backs?" she says, grinding her teeth. "Are you here to spy on the rest of us too!?"

Sasha and Connie both look back at him. Curious for what answer Jean has prepared.

Jean fists his hands in his sides. "I... I am just as suspect as you are." he says. "The whole... Rest of you..."

"A suspect?" Mikasa spits angrily.

"They are keeping us in the dark because it's all they can do..." Jean shakes his head. "We're all still under the suspicion of being shifters ourselves."

Connie barks a laugh. "You-- you've gotta be kidding!? Right!? Right!?" his laughter dies down and he nervously glances at everyone else. A dead silence settles on the squad.

Jean takes a deep breath. "They have no other choice. Realistically speaking, I would suspect us myself if four people from our closer comrades turned out to have an ace up their sleeve. First Eren. And Annie, Then Armin and now Reiner." he says. "And after what little Ymir confessed about the titans."

Sasha raises a hand. "Ok, I don't know what that is. Can you explain it slowly?" she asks.

Jean frowns, he points at Connie. "When Connie told his hypothesis of the titans inside wall Rose to be citizens of Ragako-- Commander Erwin needed proof. Hange did make Ymir confess the part that Titans are really a breed of humans who were turned into pure titans by a special syringe and could only revert back if they eat a titan of 'the nine'."

Jean looks at Historia from the corner of his eyes. "Who makes titans? What makes titans? And what is 'the nine'? Ymir's answers

have all been very vague up until this point."

"Maybe that's because SHE DOESN'T KNOW!" Historia shouts.

Jean takes a calming breath. "Please keep your voice down unless you want Moblit to catch me spilling regiments secrets!"

"None of what you said were secrets." Mikasa reminds him.

Jean feels an awkward smile rise to his face. "Yeah, but this will be," he says. "If we don't find proof to what Ymir is saying soon, she'll be fed to a random pure titan to test that theory."

Historia's breath caught in her throat. "What-- what are you talking about!?" she whispers, barely able to hide the shake in her hands. "Are they-- are they going to kill--"

Connie huffs. "That's ridiculous! We have Annie right there in the--"

"But Annie's existence is a secret only those who were present in the battle know." Jean reminds them all. "If Annie is overheard is more or less mentioned, the Military police will take her custody from the scouts. And besides..." Jean takes a deep breath. "There is no pure titan that can eat that crystal."

Silence settles.

Historia looks at her comrades' eyes and then she opens her mouth. "What if... What if the MP fire her." Historia asks.

Jean arches an eyebrow in confusion. "Fire her?"

Sasha's eyes beam. "Yeah that's... That makes sense! If they fire her before the existence of her titan goes public--"

"--then they can't fight for her custody." Jean whispers, he rubs his chin thoughtfully. "That's right. But it's a far fetch. I can ask Marco if she has ever had any bad slip ups but I highly doubt Marco will just tell us that with enough proof to frame her."

"Yeah, Marco is too much of a softie." Mikasa growls.

"Well, it's the only chance we have right now. *Miraculously* ." Jean looks at Historia. "That way, Ymir will most likely be freed too. If we somehow use enough thunder spears to break her crystal and feed her to a random titan."

"What is wrong with us..."

The group is stunned to silence by Connie's words. He stares at his friends with wide eyes and a trembling smile. "It's Annie we're talking about..." he mumbled. "We're plotting her death... No... We're plotting her execution!"

Jean looks down, there is no denying the words Connie was saying.

But to prove their innocence and win back the scouts' trust without killing Ymir, it was something that needed to be done.

Jean shuts his eyes and continues. "For now, we need to gather as much information as we can." he says, looking at his squadmates. "I meet with Commander Erwin regularly but still- he doesn't trust me to tell me most of this stuff directly. I'll meet up with Marco with the first chance I get..."

Jean meets Sasha and Historia's gaze. "When we have a good enough plan to prove all that Ymir's said-- guess we can rest easy."

They both nod.

Mikasa's silence doesn't slip from his mind. She doesn't respond to his offers and just stares one hundred miles ahead, plotting her own mission.

Jean turns his torch to the stables.

And just as he expected, there is a Mikasa-shaped shadow standing next to her horse.

"Nice night for an escape..." he whispers, not meaning any ill intentions.

Mikasa stills, then her shoulders relax and she slowly pulls off her hoodie. "Congratulations, Kirstein." she spits bitterly. "You caught me."

She turns around and holds her hands up, she's fully geared in her ODM and her face lacks any emotions. "What are you gonna do? Stop me?" Mikasa growls angrily. "Well, if they deem Eren and Armin not good enough to launch an expedition, I'm going alone!"

Jean blinks in surprise. "Mikasa..."

"Stay with team Hange as much as you want-- I just witnessed Annie and Reiner kill everyone in the last Hange squad and I'm sure if I don't hurry, that'll be Eren and Armin's fate too." she says.

She tilts her head to the side. "What do you say in your defense? Do you have anything to say, even?"

Jean takes a deep breath. Her accusation hits a little too close to home. "I know. It's my fault. I can't do anything to make Eren and Armin miraculously come back-- or make Hange and commander Erwin trust us again or bring back squad Miche..." he admits. "But Look, that suicidal maniac is more stubborn than to die like this. Especially when Armin is with him." Jean assures her. "If-- no, *when* -- they come back, commander Erwin is probably going to jail both of them if we do nothing to lift the accusations."

Jean takes a hesitating step closer. "Don't you want the scouts to trust them once they come back?"

Mikasa closes her eyes with a sigh.

She pulls down her hoodie completely and pets her horse. "You look too confident, are you sure they'll come back?"

"Eren's a titan, impossible probably isn't defined in his dictionary." Jean admits, awkwardly rubbing the back of his head.

Mikasa hums. She doesn't answer him back, instead, she leads her horse back into the stables.

She completely ignores Jean as she walks out.

Jean opens his mouth to say something but promptly stops himself.

She stops for a moment, just a moment to take a deep breath. She turns around, just to look at the other from the corner of her eyes. "Don't forget." Mikasa whispers before she walks out. "You're the reason we're in this mess."

Marco isn't given off days easily.

The work in stoheess is tiring on the worst days and the superiors almost always dump their work on the newer recruits. And ever since Annie has gone MIA, and Marco was partnered with Marlowe, his workload has gotten ever worse.

So when he receives Jean's letter about dire news about Annie, Marco asks for a day off and heads to the scouts regiment.

To his surprise, Jean and Mikasa are waiting for him in the front. There is no trace of the joy he wants to find in Jean's eyes.

He smiles awkwardly and jumps down from his horse. "Jean! Mikasa! Long time no see." he says with a polite smile. "How are you guys doing?"

"Not good." Mikasa answers. "I'll be blunt. You were Annie's partner. Do you have any dirt on her we can use to get her fired?"

Marco blinks in surprise. "Uhm. Excuse me? I think I heard you wrong." he repeats.

"I'm afraid you didn't." Mikasa says. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't need it to save Armin and Eren, Marco."

Marco tilts his head, he looks over at Jean with questions written all over his face.

Jean sighs and nods. "I'm afraid she's not lying."

Armin opens his eyes.

Eren's amputated hand sticks between the titans teeth and the other holds to its upper gum. An angry roar echoes all around Armin. He covers his ears by instinct, but that is the wrong thing to do, because he falls to the ground when nothing is holding him up.

He falls in the soft hands of the smiling titan. She slowly brings her to the ground.

He doesn't have time to react because titans sprout around him. They run to them as if they've been summoned by their master, which they have.

Armin covers his ears and pulls his knees to his chest, the sounds make his chest ache and his ears sting and--

NO! No don't think about it--

Don't--

Colossal titans march in his vision. Pure titans get crushed under their feet after eating whatever there was left of the marleyans. Jean

is among them, Connie is among them. He has lost sight of everyone and is in the bony hands of Eren's founding titan, watching everything unfold.

wait --

Armin's eyes widened. The titans attack the smiling titans. Eren is standing on his feet, on the ground. He yells another time and the titans attack faster.

Armin jumps to his feet. He holds Armin's shoulders and shakes him until his green eyes are looking at Armin's eyes. "Eren..." Armin whispers. "The titans... They're obeying you!"

Eren's eyes widened.

He stops in his tracks and looks back, the titans are quickly cannibalizing the titan.

"Grisha..."

Eren flinches. A sharp Headache travels Eren's skull like a flash, he tenses immediately.

"No matter what form I take..."

A woman in her thirties smiles at him, with dark eye bags under her eyes. A syringe injects into her back.

"I'll come and find you--"

"EREN!"

Eren gasps and reality washes over him. Armin shakes his shoulders, his blue eyes more moment away from a full blown panic. "Eren! Stop the titans from eating her!"

her?

Since when is a titan worthy of human pronouns--

"EREN!"

Armin shakes him harder. "Don't kill the smiling titan! Order them to stop!"

Eren blinks in surprise.

Why should he...

Why should he save a titan...

DINA!!

"STOP!" Eren yells and the titans freeze up.

Armin blinks, he looks around and sees the titans frozen, as if they were statues made of blood and teared muscle.

Eren pants loudly. He shuts his mouth and takes a deep breath through his nose. "What--" he swallows hard. "What was that?"

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. "I don't know." he lies. "Whatever it is. You can control titans, it's happened twice already. And we need to test it more."

Eren looks at his bare hands. "I..." he whispers. "... I can control titans?"

Armin smiles, he points at the frozen titans behind them. "Clearly," he says. "Let's take this titan to the walls. Can you uhm... Order her to follow us?"

Eren arches an eyebrow. "Uhm. How do I do that?" he asks, confused. "Like uhm, *follow us!*"

The titan didn't move.

Armin hums thoughtfully. "Maybe you need to have physical contact with that smiling titan..." he says. "Based on observation... This ability of yours only kicked in when in contact with special titans."

Eren swallows hard, beads of sweat forms on his face. "Yeah yeah... That makes sense..." he whispers. Eren takes a deep breath, he slowly walks towards the bundle of titans frozen between each other. He touches the closest part of the smiling titan he can reach, her hand.

The effect is immediate. The titans tense and Eren eyes turn a gentle purple hue. "Follow me..." he says. "Follow me to the walls..."

The titans untangle from each other. The smiling titan rises to her feet.

Nothing happens at first, but when Eren takes a step back, the titan starts following him.

Eren takes a step back, then forward.

The titan mimics him exactly.

Eren laughs awkwardly, he turns to Armin with a bitter smile. "This is strange..." he whispers.

"Tell me about it..." Armin whispers back. "... It's a little turn of fate."

Eren clicks his tongue. "What's so special about this titan anyway...?"

Armin shrugs. "Who knows? Certainly not me." he lies. "What I know now, is that we're finally safe from the titans. At least for now."

"Safe from the titans..." Eren repeats it under his breath. He tastes the words. Armin saw it in his eyes, the moment reality settles in his jade green eyes.

He dares...

He takes Armin's shoulder and stops him from moving. Eren grips Armin's shoulder tightly but not tight enough to hurt. "Hey Armin..." Eren whispers. "Do you think... Do you think if we go head to the opposite of the walls... Do you think we'll find the ocean?"

The question freezes the wheels in Armin's head. "Huh?" he hums, confused.

Armin slowly turns back, Eren is looking directly south. His jade eyes suddenly stunned at the view of wall Maria in the far distance. "Just look at us... We can... I don't know, order the titans to cannibalize themselves or something." he whispers. "And then... Then we can go to the ocean! Isn't that nice!?"

Eren's jade eyes are hopeful when he turns back around. "Armin... For the first time ever-- we have a solid chance!"

Something burns in his eyes, under his finger tips, it pours into his voice.

It's *hope* .

Armin won't dare to let that fire die. It pulls something from his heart, he's missed this. He's missed this hopeful Eren. His smiles and his hope whenever he promises him to see the ocean together.

"Armin..." Eren almost chokes. "We can make our promise a reality!"

Armin shuts his eyes. "I-- we--"

"We can always go back to the walls!" Eren offers, he looks at the smiling titan. "See, the titans are obeying me!"

Armin takes a sharp breath.

How can he possibly say no?

A chance? To see the ocean again? This time without the weight of reality on their backs.

"Realistically speaking..."

Armin hums.

No, that's a good idea.

Not only because he can re-experience a precious memory but because he can evaluate the depth of changes done in Marley.

Going to the south is not an option, considering Zeke and his fellow might still be camping in the south or even near Shiganshina. Armin can't risk another battle especially with Eren in this condition.

That leaves the closest coast, the western one. it would take the entire night to get there on titan foot and they'll have to jump over the western side of wall Maria.

West is the next coast Marley would try to expand their movements on, considering it's the closest to their next biggest military center after Liberio.

Armin can't stop the smile from creeping up to his eyes. "Fine!" Armin whispers. "Let's give it a shot!" He crosses his arms over his chest. "You know we might die doing this right? We're abusing this little turn of fate."

A wicked smile spreads over Eren's face. "Hey, don't you think we'll have better things to offer Hange if we actually test this little 'turn of fate' before reporting it to them?"

Eren's eyes sparkled with hope. "Wait-- we can go to shiganshina and see whatever my dad left for us there--"

"Yeah, I wouldn't go that far." Armin whispers. "Based on my calculations, we're much closer to the western side of wall Maria than we are to the south."

Of course, that was a lie.

Armin narrows his eyes and stares at the ground. He takes a piece of wood and draws three circles within each other to represent the three walls. "We're here." he says, pointing at the right side of the area between the second and third circle. "If we continue west and keep going there, we have a much higher chance than finding the ocean than from the south."

and less chance of running into Reiner and Zeke.

He doesn't dare say, because then, Eren would ask how he knows they are in the south.

"And we can skip over Wall Maria by ordering the smiling titan to climb up the walls." Armin offers. He meets Eren's eyes again. "I have no idea how long it's going to take to reach the ocean."

That is perhaps the only truth he has said over this night.

Eren hums. "Seems fair enough." he says. "Bring your hand down!" he tells the titan.

The smiling titan brings her hand down.

It takes a lot of courage for Eren to step into her hand, and then hold his hand out for Armin to take it and ride with him.

He stretches his open hand and offers the softest smile he can. "So..." he whispers. "Will you come to the ocean with me?"

Armin takes his hand and hops into the smiling titans hand.

"Let's just see how well you lead us there." Armin whispers with a smile.

The smiling titans hold her hand near her chest, probably because of Eren's worry that they might fall.

Her first step makes the grounds shake.

Her second step is much more quiet.

"Dina..."

He takes a blond woman's hand, whom he'd never seen. She doesn't take her eyes off of the walls and the long line in front of them. A line that led to a security and then---

The woman squeezes his hand three times. A small smile settles on her lips. She pulls her scarf tighter around her hair, a smirk slowly forming on her face. "We're in this together." she says. "Freedom, right?"

We're in this together.

Three squeezes.

Such an easy non-verbal way to communicate, isn't it?

He thinks. However, they are not his own thoughts.

Eren wakes up with a loud gasp.

He rubs the side of his face and looks around, to his surprise, the smiling titan has slowed down to small steps. Eren looks around, they are getting closer and closer to Maria.

And the night keeps getting darker and darker. The lack of moonlight makes it worse.

It's time to climb up.

"Hey, uhm, smiling titan--" he orders hesitantly. "Can you climb up?"

The smiling titan looks ahead. To Eren's surprise, her free hand nails harden and she sinks it into the walls with a loud banging sound.

Eren's eyes fall to Armin's sleeping face. He stirs in his sleep, startled by the sudden shake.

"Oi!" Eren yells at the titan. "A little calmer! Can't you see he's sleeping!"

The titan looks down at them, silently.

Eren sighs loudly. Armin will certainly wake up if this continues.

An idea sparkles in his mind. Eren looks at the titans in the far area. He points his hand at them and touches his other hand to the smiling titans fist. "Come here!" he whispers.

It works, the other titans who were previously ordered to ignore them, run towards them, circling around Eren. Their hunger filled eyes scare Eren for a moment, then he calms himself down and points at the other side of the wall, hoping titans would be gathering there too.

"All of you." he whispers, low enough that it wouldn't disturb Armin's rest. "Form a stair The smiling titan can pass silently."

They get his order.

Slowly and silently, the titans get on their hands and knees and other titans climb them and do the same, until it's a secure enough stair for the smiling titan to climb.

It does.

It takes a few minutes to reach the top of wall Maria. Eren doesn't take his eyes off of Armin's peaceful sleep. When they reach the top of the wall, Eren smiles. He looks at the titans they passed and whispers. "Freeze up." he orders.

All the titans harden, frozen like that forever. Eren can't stop the smile that paints his face. "Man. Killing titans is going to be fun from now on!"

To their luck, the titans on the other side of the wall are far less and the ride down far more tricky.

However Armin doesn't wake up during the duration of it all.

Eren leans down and kisses the top of his head. "I'll wake you up when we're near the ocean..." he promises.

Eren looks at the deep, endless darkness that awaits them.

"Let's go."

"Armin..."

Armin groans angrily.

"Armin woke up... We're almost there."

Soft hands slowly shake the sleep off of his mind. Armin rubs his eyes, his words leave his mouth sleepy and incomprehensive.

"What is it?"

Armin opens his eyes. The world blurs around him, then slowly it fixes. Eren is in the center of his attention. His nose starts to work and he can sense the saltwater in the air.

Armin's eyes widen.

Eren's hands cup his face, he smiles from eye to eye.

"Armin we're here!"

Armin's senses recover enough for him to feel the sand under his fingertips. But it's not the cold sand of the paths, it's warm and softer than anything he's ever felt.

Armin sits up and looks at his right.

Waves of the ocean hit the shores, hitting the sand just a few meters away from him.

Armin can't paint it in one word.

He knows its dawn. The morning sun is shining its yellow and orange light everywhere. The ocean is absolutely fascinating, it makes Armin wonder whether it'll change the first time seeing it or the hundredth time.

Armin stumbles forward.

The subtle sound of waves and the lack of any war ships as far as his eyes work, leaves him flying in the air.

Before he knows it, Armin has thrown his boots out and he's walking into the wet sand, savoring the sensation under his feet.

He lets the wind dance over his face, he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath of fresh air.

Something hits his barefoot. He looks down, the waters have brought something to the shore. It's a seashell, a small one. It's barely the size of his palm.

Armin holds the seashell in his hands.

The wind blows past his face.

Warm hands take his own and cover the seashell, Armin looks up and Eren is holding the seashell with him.

Eren smiles. Armin chokes on words because Eren isn't supposed to be smiling. He's supposed to be staring at the deep end, all depressed and anxious for reasons he refused to tell Armin.

This Eren is...

peaceful.

"Just as you explained it, right?" Eren whispers. His jade eyes glow in the sunlight.

Armin swallows hard. He looks at the horizon, it's quite hard to tell where the ocean ended and the sun began.

He opens his mouth to say something but words fail him. He lets the ocean talk for them instead of staining its harmony with pointless words.

A big splash of water hits his face.

Armin stumbles and falls, the shell slips from his hand and gets lost in the waters. He pulls himself up with a loud yell of: "Eren!"

The other laughs out loud. "Salty, isn't it!?" he yells and throws another wave at Armin.

Armin tries to cover himself with his hands but it's no use. So instead, Armin dives at him and throws as much water as he can. Eren laughs very loudly, reacts with an even bigger splash.

Eren laughs and runs to the shore, Armin catches up to him and tackles him to the shores.

They roll around until Eren's on top and his body cages Armin's, his hands on either side of his face. Eren smirks, Armin wants to wipe it from his face.

Eren's thumb moves to his face, he wipes some of the sand on Armin's left cheek, a little too slowly. His eyes never leave Armin's, who was also cursed to stare at his jade green eyes forever.

Armin gulps loudly when his thumb keep caressing his face, it travels over his face to cup his chin and move over Armin's bottom lip.

His eyes move from Armin's blue-and-violet eyes down to his lips. "I... I want to do something daring." Eren whispers, he bites his own lips. His jade green eyes solely focused on Armin's chapped lips. "Can I?"

Armin feels embarrassed and daring at the same time, his fingers raised to cling to the others' short hair.

All the thoughts of why he shouldn't do this slips from his mind. He doesn't wait for Eren to choose, he pulls the other down and smashes their lips together. He pulls his hands around Eren's neck to keep the others locked close.

Eren closes his eyes too, he angles his head to deepen the kiss. Playfully biting the blonds lips.

A particularly strong wave knocks them over and makes them roll in the sand.

Armin bursts out laughing. "The world doesn't want you to kiss me, apparently."

Eren sits up to his elbows, a frown on his face. "Ha-Ha, Armin." he whispers. "I think--"

Eren looks at the horizon and then stops talking.

Confused, Armin looks in the same direction. His eyes widen, he curses his luck.

On the other side of the ocean, a big warship is approaching the horizon, it's far enough that it's nothing but a black dot right now.

However, it's getting close.

"Our times up, Eren." Armin whispers. "We need to leave, now!"

Eren blinks in surprise. "What-- what is that?" he asks. "Is it-- is it a swimming metallic titan or something?"

Armin shakes his head. "I don't know, but I can't risk it." he says. "Call all the titans in the area and let them rest around here."

Eren stands up. He wipes some of the sands off of his wet clothes. "Man, I never thought I'd be using titans against titans but here we are." Eren hums.

Armin takes Eren's hand and pulls him back to the shore. "Where is she?"

"She?"

"I mean the smiling titan!"

Eren points behind them and Armin sees her, a titan standing a little far from them. Armin runs as fast as he can, he never lets go of Eren's hand even when they are in the safety of the titans hand.

His contact with the smiling titan makes his jade eyes turn purple. He looks around and says: "come here and run around the... The..."

"The beach." Armin offers the word.

"... The beach." Eren says. The two or three titans in the area obey him.

Eren orders the smiling titan to head to the walls and she starts running. Perhaps she felt Eren's fear of the warship too.

She started running faster than she ever did.

"How do you think others will react when we go back?" Eren asks when they are far from the shores.

Armin blinks in surprise. "Uhm... What?"

"We have great news for everyone, Armin! We've found freedom!" Eren throws his hands in the air. "Just you wait--"

Armin shakes his head. He grips Dina Yeagers hand as tightly as she can to avoid falling down. "Yeah, good luck explaining that to a furious Mikasa," he says.

The smile falls from Eren's face. "Oh no... Do you think they've... They've declared us dead?"

Armin shrugs.

"Armin can we... Can we not go back?"

Armin freezes.

Changing directions to see the ocean is one thing but never going back to the walls entirely?

Eren rubs the back of his head, almost awkwardly. "I mean, we can explore for a few more days and then go back." Eren offers. "That's what we always wanted, right? We're free to do so now."

Armin takes a deep breath. "We... I'm sorry, We can't just run away like this." he says. "Actually... We can't let anyone know we've reached the ocean."

Eren arches an eyebrow. "We're covered in sand. One glance and commander Hange can guess we weren't just in wall Rose territory."

"Then we'll have to wash off." Armin hums. "I think there must be a small lake in wall Maria in our way."

Eren smiles bitterly. He wants to protest but decides to give in. After all, Armin has always been the smarter one.

Eren's hand, still in Armin's, squeezes the blond's hands three times.

Armin arches an eyebrow, but otherwise doesn't say anything.

What if we kissed?

In the place we dreamed since we were kids...

With your titanized step-mom watching over us?

Lightening strikes twice

Chapter 14: Lightening strikes twice

YALLLL

today I woke up and found out FreshgrassAkjee has kudosd and bookmarked this fic!?!?! Man I can not express my joy with words right now. If you're reading this-- thank you so much for readingggggg ♥♥♥♥ and I absolutely love your fic "painted skies"! (This is also heavily inspired by it)

ANNNNNND WE HAVE AN ART!! Thank you for doubling tripling quadrupling my joy ♥♥♥

Please see it [here!](#)

By Nimura_Art on twitter.

By the way I came back from vacation and hopefully we'll back on track for weekly updates again! If this Covid doesn't knock me out.

WARNIIING

Death, morgues, some dead bodies. Nothing serious.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The underground chambers are cold. Colder than any secret prison held in the interior, but Marco barely feels any of it because the

scene in front of him takes all his attention away.

Jean shuts the door behind him, him and Mikasa stay dutifully behind, giving Marco enough space to digest what's inside the room and the reason why it's so cold.

Marcos jaw drops and he can only trace his hand over the ice cold crystal between him and...

... an unconscious, unresponsive, and utterly battle ridden looking Annie. She has unsealed wounds and scars on her face that weren't there the last time they met. Some deep scars under her eyes too.

"Im... Impossible..." Marco gasps. He immediately pulls his hand back as if the cold burnt him. He looks at Jean and Mikasa's faces immediately, hoping to find any trace of pranking in their faces, which were literally and hypothetically darker than they ever were. "Is this... Is this really Annie?"

Jean bites his tongue. It's Mikasa who spits the truth like He's reporting the weather. "Yes, and she and Reiner killed the entire Hange squad without breaking a sweat" Mikasa says simply. "And she's like this because she was afraid Levi squad would kill her." She crosses her arms over her chest. "There is no other reason she'd be like that."

Marco bites his lip. He looks back at the crystal. "I can't believe this--"

He turns his back to the crystal and meets the emotionless eyes of his friends. "How can you-- how can you be so calm about this? It's Annie!? What else? You're going to tell me we know the rogue or the armored or the colossal?"

Jean crosses his arms over his chest with a deep sigh.

"Eren. Reiner. And the last one we don't know." Mikasa answers for him. "And that's why we need your help. If we don't use Annie to

prove something. They'll use Eren or Ymir to do it."

Mikasa steps closer, her death stare glaring right at Marcos soul. "You get this Marco? Killed. It's either Annie who killed hundreds or Eren who was at our side this entire time."

Marco steps back, his eyes wide and nervous sweat gathers on his skin despite the cold. "Is there anyone who is not a titan in our year!?" Marco snaps angrily. "You-- you can be one too! Weren't you and Eren--"

Jean steps forward. "You can trust her words. You can trust mine." Jean says, standing between Marco and Mikasa glancing back at her and pleading with her to calm down before looking back at Marco again. "I know all of this is sudden and too much to ask but..." Jean takes a deep breath. "we need you to report any wrong doing bad enough that'll get her fired from the MP."

Marcos face crumbles. "Then you'd just-- let her be eaten?"

"Exactly yes!" Mikasa yells. "If it's Eren's life that I'm saving, I'll let that bitch be eaten ten times over!"

Marco's eyes widened. "Jean is this--" he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "Why don't the scouts just... Do it? It's not like the MP is looking for her no matter how much I persist."

Jean rubs the back of his neck. "I have... I have no idea how the commander's brain works but I know this-- if we get Annie fired, we'll save Eren and Ymir. Both. From suspicion or worse, getting killed."

Marco rubs the side of his face. "I should report this... I should tell them you have her here like this."

"But you won't." Mikasa growls.

Jean shoots her a concerned look. Then, he looks back at Marco. Hesitantly, he puts a hand on his shoulder. "Marco... I knew it was a

risk to bring you here, but I know I can trust your judgment."

Marco shuts his eyes and his head falls.

"You were partners with her to know something was wrong about her. Let me guess, she disappeared when we went on expeditions. Came back bruised but her bruises healed without once leaving a scar..." Jean trailed off.

From the way Marco shook his head he knew he is being spot on.

Marco gently shrugs off Jean's hand and walks towards the door, having had enough of their talk. "I need time to think about this."

Mikasa wants to stop him, to block his exit but Jean gently shakes his head. Grinding her teeth, she decides to let Marco leave.

"Marco..." Jean calls out when he's moments away from the exit of the underground chambers.

Marco stops.

Jean's eyes soften just a tad bit. "Eren and Ymir don't have much time left."

Jean sees the way his fist tightens around the door handle, but his longer black hair covers his eyes and he can't see the turmoil of emotions behind the freckled boy's eyes.

Marco leaves without saying another word.

"So... Let me get this straight." Hange hums. "Eren touched this... This smiling titan and then, all of a sudden, all the other titans were obeying him?"

"Affirmative."

"That's what we saw."

Eren and Armin speak at the same time.

Hange rubs their chin and looks over their shoulder to check on Moblit and the rest of the patrol squad of the garrisons who accidentally found two teenagers being moved by a titan and reported it.

Moblit stares at Dina Fritz's titan, dumbfounded at how dead the titan looks without the will to eat humans.

Hange blinks in surprise. "You two." they say, looking directly at them. "What happened? I need explicit detail!!"

Armin takes a deep breath.

In a moment, Eren's hand snakes behind them and takes his hand. Their fingers laced together and somehow that helps calm the storm in Armin's heart. He smiles, a small smile that can barely be seen.

Squeeze, Squeeze, Squeeze.

Armin smiles to himself. He has started to understand that taking his hand and squeezing three times is Eren's new attempt at providing emotional support. He sure doesn't know where these ideas come to Eren's mind but he appreciates them.

Eren is the first to lift his head and speak. "It was a big stroke of luck," he admits. "After we managed to run away from the enemies, we were stranded on the titan territory until we came across it."

Hange narrows his eyes at Eren and Armin's clothes. "And why is your clothes wet?"

"We had to stop to relax near a lake." Armin offers.

Well, that's not a lie. Other than that, they stopped there to wash off the evidence of being near the ocean.

Armin glances at the other. Hopefully, Eren's lips are sealed but Mikasa is bound to find out eventually, and it's better to tell her as backup if they ever needed to leave the walls again.

Hange puts their hands on their hips, the angry garrison behind them glare at Eren and Armin, all of whom hold their swords tight enough to bruise their hands.

Hange hums, they look down suspiciously and turn around to Eren with a smirk. "Well, it makes sense that it's behaving. But I'm afraid you'll have to prove this baffling 'turn of fate' as you put it."

Eren shrugs. "Yeah that's... That's easy to prove, but I'm afraid I'll need some ODM or someone to get me near the titan to physically touch it."

Hange thinks about it.

They actually think about it and it pains Armin to see that emotionless but calculating look in their eyes bloom towards Eren and Armin. When previously trust used to come so easily.

Well, with the feats Armin has pulled in this timeline, their trust is too much to ask for.

"I'll take you down!" Hange says, opening their arms as if they are waiting for a hug.

But Moblit grabs Eren's hand. "Section commander, you're too reckless! What if what Eren says doesn't work?" He then takes Eren's elbow and nods at him to get ready. "I'll take him. You should stay back and observe from above."

Moblit and Eren jump down before Hange could start nagging. They put their hands on their hips and look at the distance. "Well, I think we have some audience to prove it, don't you think, Armin?"

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. He can see the same hoard of titans that keep getting closer to the walls. Armin bites his lips and nods. "Well, if everything goes well, this shouldn't be a problem." he tells them.

Hange looks at him from the corner of their eyes before focusing down on the smiling titan and Eren and Moblit on the ground. "Let's hope you're right, Armin..."

Down on the ground, Eren doesn't waste any time. He touched the smiling titans foot and his eyes shine purple immediately. He turns to the approaching titans and holds his open palm towards them. **"Stop."**

The titans immediately stop.

Hange's eyes widened. They step closer to the edge and squint their eyes to make sure they hadn't seen it wrong.

Eren waves his hand. **"Move back."** he orders.

The titans in the horizon take one step back, then another before stopping completely.

Armin has to cover his eyes. The titans are exactly in front of the glowing morning sun and he can't keep looking at them for long without his eyes protesting. But he saw that All titans in the area stepped back. All those who could hear Eren anyway. Armin is too busy looking at Hange's reactions to actually care about the founding titans' powers being put to use.

Hange's eyes widen and their jaws drop and they take off their glasses just to put them back in place to make sure they haven't seen anything wrong.

Hange quickly gathers themselves and clears his throat. "Ok, Eren. You can release them?"

A loud "WHAT!?" followed from the ground.

Hange growls under their teeth angrily and crouches down to scream at the two of them. "FINE! I GET IT! You can stop now."

Eren lets go of the titan and in the same time his eyes grow back to jade green instead of purple as his connection to the paths is severed.

Moblit carries Eren up the wall and they both surprisingly land on their feet.

Hange aggressively clears their throat. "AHEM! If you two are hiding anything, it's time to spill the beans."

Eren raises his hands in defeat. "I swear to the walls I don't know how this happened." he says, a hint of fear in his voice. "And... All I know is that... Is that..."

Eren trails off and his eyes slowly open, as if he awoke from a deep sleep.

So shoo. I don't have time for you. If you want to use the founder, use it locally without the paths.

Who was that? Did it... Have a face?

Eren shakes his head. "I know it's incomplete." he admits. "I think you noticed how I can only control titans nearby and not all of them."

Hange fixes their glasses, they lean closer just to stare more closely at Eren's eyes. "So you want to control them all, huh?"

Eren presses his mouth to a thin line. "Well, what better way than to just... Kill them all?" Eren offers.

Before Hange's glare can get any more heated, Armin stands between them with an awkward smile. "Uhm, Section commander Hange, this is all we knew, believe us. We need to put it to more use. Actually, I'm only sure about two things." Armin holds up a finger. "Eren can only access this titan while holding contact with the smiling titan... And the second is that he can control titans in a small radius but his control is absolute."

Hange rubs their chin.

"That's interesting and far more than anyone can ask." they say. "Controlling titans. That's new and needs some real-- real testing. You know what I mean?"

Eren nods. Both him and Armin understood it perfectly.

The silence is quickly disrupted by two zipping sounds of ODM gear coming from the inner side of the walls. A few feet next to them, Mikasa lands followed quickly by Jean.

She stands up and freezes on stop. Armin waves very awkwardly. "Eren!? Armin!?" Mikasa yells.

Armin expects her to come to them, mostly Eren, and hug the life out of him. but instead she grabs him by her collar and shakes him viciously. "HOW DARE YOU--"

Mikasa shakes him back and forth while screaming at his head. "I almost had to tell my mother. I HAD TO TELL HER YOU'RE M.I.A!!"

"Mi-Ka-Sa!"

Armin wants to separate them but his common sense stops him from trapping himself within the two.

Mikasa lets go of him and then points her accusing finger at Armin. "And you--" she takes a deep breath. She steps back and fills her

lungs with air to calm herself down. "Your grandfather is in the hospital."

Armin's breath caught in his throat. "Wh-what?"

"Heart attack." Mikasa says. "He's ok, thanks to..." she swallows hard. "Thanks to *Shadis*, he's fine. But you better pay him a visit in Trost hospital."

Armin immediately takes a sharp, nervous look at Hange. "Section commander can I--"

"Armin, we need to question you before you can leave." Hange says as a matter of fact, interrupting him.

"But my grandpa--"

"Is healthy just like Mikasa explained."

Hange takes a few steps forward. "Be careful, Armin. From here on, I actually have to take Eren to a cell similar to the one we're keeping Ymir in."

"WHAT!?" Armin snaps. "WHY? He hasn't done anything wrong!? Neither has she!"

Hange clears her throat. She looks at Eren and then at Armin. "Well I have to fill you in with what happened when you were gone."

Eren arches an eyebrow. "What happened?"

"Ymir has confessed something about the origins of titans. It's a theory so far and needs to be proven." Hange says. "She said there are nine intelligent titans. Humans can turn into pure titans, like the ones outside the walls, and then turn into a titan shifter if they consume one of these 'Nine' things. Apparently, you, her, the armored, colossal, female and the beast are all one of these nine."

Hange rubs their chin. "Which makes me wonder... What's your given titans name? Everyone calls you the rogue titan but--"

"Attack titan."

The word slips from Eren's tongue and freezes Armin's brain.

Blue eyes widen and look at clueless jade eyes, confused and terrified of where he possibly could have known this.

Hange arches an eyebrow. "Attack titan?"

Eren shrugs carelessly. "Well, I guess I get to name it, don't I?" he adds. "I like the sound of it."

Armin can see the subtle twitch of his lips or the way his eyes stare ahead at nowhere. The blond's eyes close softly. *this is bad. If he's getting from memories from future or the past--*

"The name doesn't matter. What matters is that if what Ymir says is true, two questions arise." Hange says. "Is every titan in the open a human? And.."

They take a deep breath.

"How and who did you and Ymir eat to get your powers?" Hange says, slowly. They stress on every syllable as if that would somehow kick start Eren's memory.

Eren shakes his head. "I'm ok if I need to be in a cell." he tells the section commander then turns his eyes to Armin. "I'll be fine..."

Mikasa grinds her teeth angrily but doesn't say a word. Armin thinks maybe she knows something he doesn't. He's been gone for very crucial days so he just gives a pained look at Eren when Moblit leads him away and tries to shut down his mind from protesting. His eyes watch Eren be led away silently.

Armin looks down. He bites his lips before he talks. "I answered all your questions. What else can I possibly tell."

Hange puts a gentle hand on their shoulder. "Write whatever you said, report it. I've already told Moblit to write what you told me down."

Their hold on his shoulder gets tighter.

"Armin, you understand the situation, don't you?" they say. "I know you want to protect Eren. No one is blaming you for that, however, we're fighting invisible enemies here and Eren and Ymir are both titans we can't just ignore. Do you understand commander Erwin's paranoia?"

Armin swallows hard.

"Yes..."

His throat goes painfully dry.

"Grandpa!"

Unlike what Mikasa told him, the old man was discharged from the hospital. Armin had to run all the way from the hospital near the Trost exterior all the way to the small living spaces he lived in.

Armin barges in the room.

He looks immediately at his grandfather's bed in the middle of the house. His eyes gather tears like a child and he throws himself at the foot of the bed. His grandfather doesn't have enough time to react, the next moment Armin is sobbing on his side.

The old man blinks in surprise. "Armin... !" he whispers. Armin's hands only tighten around him.

The old man's eyes soften. His old hands move over Armin's hair and stroke them gently. "There... There... I'm alright... How are you?" he adds as a joke. "Long time no see?"

Armin's frantic breathing slows down to a normal one after a few minutes of hugging his grandfather. He slowly untangles his hands and wipes the tears from his face. "Gr-Grandpa... What happened? I heard you..."

The old man shakes his head and pushes Armin's hair back. "Had a heart attack? Well, thanks to Carlas fiance, I didn't die right away..." He says. "Keith performed CPR on me apparently. Until the medics arrived."

Armin sighs in relief.

For the first time since hearing the news. He's glad commandant shadis was around to help.

"I'm fine, Armin." his grandfather says. "I'm just an old man, you know. Things like this happen."

Armin looks directly into the old man's wrinkled eyes. "Grandpa... Did you... Did you receive shocking news or..."

"No." his grandpa says, striking down the news. "I think I worked a little too hard that day. The news of the titans coming in did a number on us, you know."

Armin sits back up. He takes a deep breath. His conscience calms down knowing his grandpa's heart attack at least wasn't related to him.

For a brief moment, Armin's mind thinks about Annie. Where is she? She probably is back at Marley with her father. There is no way the scouts could have defeated her.

(Right?)

She is probably with her father right now.

His attention snaps back to reality when his grandfather puts his hand over Armin's angry fist. The blonde immediately relaxes. "I believe in your strength Armin..." his grandfather says, holding his hand firmly into his own. "Even when you don't yourself."

The old man takes a deep breath. "But every time you get out of that gate-- I keep thinking what if Armin doesn't come back this time? I just ask one thing of you... And that's to know what you're as frequently as I can, ok?"

The old man sits up on his bed, he slowly shakes his head as Armin sits down next to him.

"So, Armin, would you mind brewing some tea? I want to know what you were doing the past week with detail if you spare me some of your time."

Armin nods sharply. "Grandpa-- of course-- you might not believe most of what I'll say and there's some government secrets and--"

The old man lifts his head with a small smile. "Try me, young man. I just want to know what my grandson is up to, that's all."

Armin can only answer with a small smile of his own.

Mikasa would have gotten visitation eventually.

But when section commander Hange told her Eren wanted to see her so soon, that caused her to think twice.

She stands in front of the doors to the dungeon, a soldier opens the door for her and she takes the torch from him. She tries not to think about the reasons as to why Eren would ask her help as she walks down the stairs.

She passes a sleeping Ymir on her way and she can only spare her a look.

Even from afar, she can hear a tapping sound coming from the end of Eren's cell. He is waiting for her near the bars. Mikasa meets his gaze and her eyes widen.

He looks... Terrified...

Mikasa puts the torch on its place in the wall and arches an eyebrow. "What's wrong?" she asks. "Hange said you wanted to talk to me?"

Eren massages the side of his face. The semi-darkness only amplifies the dark bag under his eyes that seems to have appeared very suddenly.

Eren opens his mouth but then shuts it. Mikasa doesn't pressure him. What he wants to say is obviously very bitter so she gives him some time.

After a few seconds of frozen silence, Eren steps back from the bars and his tired Jade eyes stare at Mikasa's stormy gray orbs.

"I think I killed dad... I think I ate him..."

Eren says that and steps back. He steps back enough until his back hits the wall and he slides down. He grabs his hair and pulls, then he hides his face in his hands. "There- There I- I said it... I..."

Mikasa blinks in surprise.

The rage that bubbles in her throat matches the time she faces a titan. She can't stop herself from slamming her hands to the bars. "What!?" she yells. "What the hell do you mean??"

Dr Yeagers gentle smile passes her mind and that only makes her more conflicted.

"That's impossible Eren." she says, narrowing her eyes. "Dr Yeager was killed in a bear attack after Shiganshina. Shadis freaking saw it!"

Eren lifts his head, the whites of his eyes turned completely red. "He never said he saw a bear. He saw dad's body *as if* he was attacked by a bear."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it-- Mikasa!" Eren pulls his hair back. "A bear!? A freaking Bear in Trost?"

Mikasa grinds her teeth together angrily. "It might just be! What do you know about the differences between a bear and a titan?"

"I know I must have gotten this power from somewhere!"

"You mean Dr Yeager was a titan and Mother never noticed!?" Mikasa snaps, throwing her hands in the air. "Where can this possibly come from!?"

Eren stands up.

"Because I am a titan. Look at me, Mikasa!" he demands. He gets closer to the bars, he points at his own heart. "I hurt Armin in Trost! I can turn into a titan! A titan! What possible explanation is better than I turned into a titan and shredded dad into pieces somehow!?"

Eren looks down, he grabs his throbbing forehead and leans against the bars. "This... This is the only thing I can come up with..."

"Then you're wrong." Mikasa says, she puts her hand over Eren's over the bars and nods. "There is no way. Ymir said humans can turn into titans when a syringe is injected. As far as I know you couldn't have injected yourself somehow."

Eren opens his mouth to say something but Mikasa beats him to it.

"Fine, you want better proof. I'll talk to..." Mikasa bites her tongue, as if it physically pained her to say the next words. "... I'll talk to Shadis. He was there right? He'll be able to give more detailed stuff to get this out of your head."

Eren sighs, he nods while looking at the ground. "That's... That's exactly what I wanted to ask of--"

"Time's up." a soldier says, his voice echoes all around the dungeons.

Mikasa nods. "I'll see you later." she promises. "Sooner than later..."

Eren tilts his head. "Are you planning on something?"

Mikasa nods. She knows she must not tell Eren now. Because if Eren knows, Armin will know and if that happens, Armin will certainly stop them from sacrificing Annie to prove Ymir's theory...

... And buy Eren and Ymir's freedom.

Mikasa nods and waves goodbye. She has to leave now, if she pushes her luck, there is no guarantee they'll let her have another visit any time soon.

Mikasa exits the dungeons with a curt thank you to the guards.

She walks back into the training grounds, maybe some ODM training will help her relax from the bomb Eren dropped.

Can that... Can that actually be true?

"MIKASA!!"

Mikasa snaps her head at the direction the voice is coming from. It's Sasha. She waves a piece of paper in the air with the biggest smile on her face. "Mikasa! You won't believe what I've got!" Sasha yells. "It came through the mail today!?"

Mikasa arches an eyebrow. "What is it?"

Sasha stands in front of her and holds up the paper. "It's a message from Marco!" she jumps. "It's for Jean but I opened it because it was emergency and Jean is still with commander Erwin but look--"

Sasha opens the letter.

"Marco says he has the evidence we need to--"

Sasha's smile slowly falls, she falls back on her feet and sighs loudly. She flips the paper in the air and holds it for Mikasa to take it.

"-- he said he just gave in the evidence that would get Annie fired to his higher ups."

Mikasa snatches the letter from her hand and reads through every line. It's a small one but with each word, Mikasa finds her joy rising.

Dear friends in the scout regiment,

I thought about what you asked of me. Although unthinkable, I too believe it needs to be done to save Ymir and Eren.

With a heavy heart, yesterday I gave the reports of an unreported crime I knew Annie committed when she was looking for a lost girl. It's about drug trafficking and was bad enough to free her from her duties as an MP and received the news today. She is no longer a soldier of the MP.

-Marco

It was pleasant enough that Mikasa could forget about what Eren told him.

Now, they can use Annie!

Now, Mikasa can rest easy knowing she won't wake up to Eren being chewed in a pure titans mouth just to prove Ymir's theory.

No matter how much Armin wants to stay with his sick grandpa, he knows he has to return to the field he neglected.

There is no time to waste when his influence has made everything so hectic. On top of it all, If everything goes accordingly, The Reiss family will start to make a move on Historia and Eren soon.

Armin doesn't like to think the stroke of luck that saved Eren last time will work this time too. Who knows, Maybe Historia actually does take the injection and take Eren's titan.

After all, Ymir's death played a great role in her character and with the freckled girl so alive and present, the changes will be noticeable, whether good or bad.

Armin sighs internally but smiles at his grandpa as he walks away, the other way at him and follows the boy with his eyes in the long road near their home.

(Armin makes a mental note to thank commandant Shadis for his on time CPR and saving his grandpa's life.)

Armin has a job and he has to be present for this occasion especially.

Hange wants to have a good look at the powers each of the titans at their disposal have. So they have conducted this match near the east of Trost.

Armin flies to the walls with his ODM and runs to the location he received in the letter a few hours ago.

He sees Hange, Mikasa, Jean, Sasha and Connie standing a few feet back.

On one side Eren tries to rub his wrists and on the other, Ymir and Historia talk with the biggest grin on the blonds face.

Armin can help but see that the only people who don't have their ODM are the three of them.

Armin ignores the other two. He stands next to Eren and taps his shoulder to get his attention. "Are you ok?" he asks, Armin points at his own eyes with worry. "You look..."

"Tired?" Eren points in for him. "Yeah... I... Was troubled."

Hange breaks their conversation by standing forward and holding up something like a white flag. "Ok now you two..." Hange says, "it's a simple spar so don't go too far! We just want to see each titan in action! go to the two opposite ends and we'll observe your fight very closely from a safe distance."

Hange clears his throat. "And remember, it's not a fight to death, but please do give everything you've got." they place their hands together. "I will be watching this match with a particular interest..."

Moblits eyebrows twitch in anxiety. "Se-section commander!"

"Ah, I'm just kidding." they wave dismissively.

Ymir crosses her arms over her chest. "Well, Eren. It does sound quite fun, doesn't it?" Ymir laughs, putting her hand on her hips. "I've never actually seen you transform. Don't tell me you're a just-talk-no-doing fella."

Eren doesn't seem phased by her words. "Let's just get this over with." he whispers. "I'm sick and tired of turning into a titan."

"Go Ymir!" Historia cheers, her lips spread into a toothy grin. "You don't have a chance, Eren!"

Eren clicks his tongue.

Armin arches an eyebrow. "Historia. You don't have the slightest clue of what you're talking about." He reminds her. "You've never seen his titan upclose. So watch your tongue."

"Ooh, really? Where was his titan when we were under titans claws back in Utgard castle!?" Historia whispers back.

Armin's eyes twitch.

"Stop arguing!" Hange says. "Both of you... To your corners! We need to start this match."

Eren nods silently.

Eren moves to the escalator on their right side. Armin grabs his elbow and stops him before he can board it. His purple eyes are dead serious. "Don't stay on defense. Ymirs titan is practically useless when it comes to hand to hand combat. she's far too agile and can harm your nape faster than you can blink." Armin whispers. "Treat it like a snake. Once you manage to hit her head hard enough or keep her mouth shut, she'll be completely at your mercy."

Eren blinks in surprise.

"Oh that... How do you know all this?" the brunet asks.

Armin points at his head. "Observations," he says simply. "Don't worry, Ymirs power levels aren't even *near* your level. Historia just made a fool of herself."

Eren smiles, the first one since they stepped inside the walls. "You scare me sometimes, Armin."

Armin lets him go and he steps inside the escalator. Moblit pulls the lever and the escalator slowly goes down.

Their eyes don't lose contact until the escalator reaches the ground with a loud *thud* .

Armin moves to stand next to Mikasa again.

She arches an eyebrow at him.

Armin smirks. "It's a definite win..." he tells her.

Mikasa nods.

Hange lifts her white flag, when she lowers it down, two lightning strikes the ground at the same time.

Smoke rises, two titans step out of it.

"Go Ymir!!" Historia cheers again.

The two titans jump at each other with an air chilling roar.

Just like Armin said, Ymir's titan is very fast and agile. Eren almost can't see her strikes coming, let alone defend himself from them.

In moments, he is protecting his nape while Ymir tries to strike his nape.

Damn it! If only I could harden like Annie--

Ymir slices again, this time, it cuts deeper into his hand. It makes electricity dance all over his titan body. Eren gasps in his human body but the titan within him roars angrily.

doesn't matter, Guess I'll lose if I don't try .

He tries to throw Ymir's titan to the walls. He manages to throw her away with an amputated hand, but she grabs the wall like it's nothing and jumps back at his nape again.

Eren's hand regenerates fast enough to block her again. He grabs his head and throws her away again.

focus.. . He tells himself, he takes a deep breath and focuses his energy on his fists.

And the next moment he aims a punch at Ymir's face, his hand crystallizes. The impact sends her back again but with the jaws' agility and balance, it does nothing against her to knock her down.

Eren stares at his own fists for a moment, glad at least he's not injured again.

Ymir roars and attacks again. This time, Eren aims another punch but Ymir easily bites down the crystallized wrist. Eren doesn't expect the crystals to do anything against her bite. Ymir's hold on him tight and with a loud it *breaks* .

Her jaw is too strong.

Eren blinks in surprise.

This can't go on any longer. She needs time to bite the hand away or spit it out. Which means her mouth will be full for a while . Eren thinks.

So he does the next thing that comes to his mind, he grabs Ymir mid air with his healthy hand and slams her to the wall, holding the smaller titan to the wall with a choking grip.

He runs along the wall, only stopping once the jaw is useless. Eren doesn't notice Once Ymir stops struggling in his grasp.

"EREN STOP!"

The command comes from Historia, not section commander Hange. Eren steps back and slowly puts Ymir's titan on the ground. The titan body is still twitching and flinching so he doesn't think he did too much damage.

But the win was his.

Hange raises their white flag and Eren nods in his titan form. He kneels down and extracts himself from his titan form.

Armin takes his ODM handles. "I'll go after him," he says.

"I need to get Ymir!"

"And that's... Precisely... Why didn't we give you ODM." Hange says, looking at Historia.

Historia looks at Armin from the corner of his eyes. "He has one," he points out.

Hange smirks. "He didn't try to sneak Eren out, now did you, Armin dear?" They remind her.

Armin doesn't wait. Hange nods at Mikasa and she jumps after Armin to get Ymir.

Historia looks down from the walls as Mikasa tries to disconnect Ymir from her titan body. "She'll walk free this time, right?"

"No. Erwin's orders, I'm afraid." Hange says. "We need to keep both Eren and Ymir arrested until their little theory is proven."

"But--"

"No Buts." Hange says. She ignores Historia and looks at Moblit once again. "Come with me. I need to check something down below."

Moblit nods again. Hange jumps down and lands on the ground in a second. They run towards the destroyed wall and Eren's amputated hands. Ymir cut off a lot of Eren's hands during this match but this one... The only one Eren managed to crystallize... Was still intact.

Hange stands in front of it. He stares at the closed fist and runs their hand over it. They move their glasses from their eyes for a moment, thinking carefully. They move to the amputated part.

The hand refused to evaporate. It looked extremely like Annie Leanheardts crystals and on top of that...

"... Ymir's jaw managed to break it." Hange says out loud.

Up until now, nothing had managed to break the crystals other than their new rockets. But even those destroyed it. If they were to try it on Leanhardt, there would be nobody left to feed a pure titan.

But if they broke it like Ymir broke this hand...

"Section commander... What are you thinking?"

"Hmm... These crystals are very much like the ones Annie Leanhardt is trapped in." Hange whispers, holding up the shattered crystals. "And she bit them off like it was nothing."

Moblit rubs the side of his face. "Section commander... I don't like the tone you're using."

Hange turns around.

They have an ear-to-ear grin.

"Mikasa, this is... Highly unlikely."

Armin says those words while gritting his teeth, trying his hardest not to act like he knows.

Their walk to Carla's restaurant is a mostly silent one, which is not uncharacteristic when Mikasa is with him. Both of them have always been the silent type and neither have had to use words to enjoy their presence. However, Armin sees the worry in her eyes or her strong grip in her scarf. So He asks what's wrong and Mikasa says the most baffling thing Armin has ever heard. Once again, Armin is faced with the fact that he has always underestimated Eren's intelligence.

Armin tries to ignore it by looking down at the stone ground as they walk through the streets of Trost.

"I told him that." Mikasa rolls his eyes. "But he doesn't listen..."

"That's so unlike him..." Armin sighs. "What has happened lately with this... This self-destruction lately?"

Mikasa shakes her head. "I don't know. I just hope I need to get some answers today."

That makes one of Armin's ears turn sharp. "Mikasa... Where are we going?"

Mikasa fists and unfists her hands. "To Mother and... And Shadis..." she growls. "I need to know when was the first time they saw Dr Yeager. If what Eren says is true then..."

"... Dr Yeager should have come from outside the walls." Armin completes for him. "But even if it is... What will we do then?"

Mikasa narrows his eyes. "We'll keep it a secret from Eren." she says, leaving no room for debate. "Mother not knowing about his titan status is already killing him, if - if he really did eat Dr Yeager then..."

Armin looks away.

Mikasa's right... That won't be good .

The rest of their walk is silent. They walk inside the restaurant with the intent to talk to Commandant Shadis. All of that leaves Armin's mind when he sees grandfather serving in the restaurant.

"Grandpa! Are you back at work already!?" Armin says loudly. "You need to rest!" he jumps to take the plates from His grandfather's hands.

"I'm not helpless, Young man." he reminds him. Armin carries the tower of plates back into the kitchen and looks around for Carla. "I can't believe you were allowed back in work!?"

His grandpa shakes his head. "Hello Mikasa. Has my grandson been up to something?" he asks.

Mikasa smiles and shakes her head.

"Anyway, what brings you here?" the old man asks.

Mikasa clears her throat. "We wanted to talk to commandant Shadis and mother..."

The old man hums. "Ah, yes. The two went to an office today. Keith said something about presenting Eren's proof of birth? Their reasons were strange so I don't exactly know." He says. "I told Carla she can leave it to me for the night."

"Grandpa! You're supposed to be bedridden!!" Armin yells.

"Will you stop worrying about me, Armin?" he says. "Actually, I worry about you much more."

The old man takes a letter from his pocket. "This came in a few minutes ago." he says, holding the paper for Armin to take it. "From a garrison."

Armin arches an eyebrow. He opens the paper and reads it outloud. "Armin Arlert and Mikasa Ackerman, Section commander Hange orders your presence."

Mikasa hums. "What could have happened in that one hour we were dismissed?"

His grandfather narrows his eyes. "What have you done?"

Armin raises his hands. "Ah, I haven't done anything!?"

"Then you better hurry. After all, your superior just ordered your presence." he reminds him. "Don't take this lightly, Armin."

"I won't. But don't work too hard too, ok?" Armin pleads with him, but he knows it'll fall on empty ears.

Mikasa and Armin exchange a look and come to a mutual agreement to come back again another time.

Eren taps his fingers endlessly to the stone walls.

Tap... Tap... Tap...

"Oi... Big tooth..."

Eren shuts his eyes and tries not to think too hard about his father, or well, his fathers death.

Telling Mikasa was the right choice. He hates this habit of hers but she will bring forth all the reasons why he's wrong in his face, and somehow, Eren wishes from the depth of his heart that he is wrong. That he hasn't eaten his father.

"Oi!"

Eren takes a deep breath.

Then there is the problem of the titan they found. The smiling titan. What are they going to do about it? Hange might try to turn her into a human again. Probably using one of the titan shifters. Either him or Ymir and--

"Oi! Stop making sound pollution, you idiot with a big tooth." she yells.

"Big tooth..." Eren repeats the insult a few times, tasting the nonexistent venom in it. Then his eyes widen when he realizes what

she's referring to. Eren turns to the wall to his right and yells: "hey! Your titan is more 'big toothed' than mine."

"Whatever! Stop that damn tapping sound. It's echoing all over this damned cell!" comes Ymir's reply from the other side of the walls. He hears shuffling of sheets and then her footsteps as she moves to the bars to lean against them. "Hey, big tooth..."

"Will you stop that?"

Ymir ignores it. "Can your titan run all the way to the sea?" she asks bluntly.

It freezes Eren's blood.

He stops, he blinks a few times. "What- what do you mean?"

"Don't worry, I don't think the guards can hear us." she says, Eren can hear the smirk in her voice. "So tell me, did you have fun at the beach?"

Eren bites his lips, how does she know?? Armin took every precaution to make sure no one finds out. They cleaned themselves in a pond and made up a story for every single second for goodness sake!

He slowly stands up. Whatever it is, Ymir has the upper hand in this. He moves to the bars to hear her and talk to her more clearly, even if he couldn't see her.

"I bet you want to know how I know." She says. "I know sand when I see it, Eren. And your pockets were full of them. That's not something you can just wash off in a lake."

Eren grips the bars. "If you know the answer then--"

"I don't. It was just a guess." she says. "Listen. One of us is going to die here and I can have a strong guess it's going to be me." she says. "Or it might be you. You might have two friends apprenticing

under Hange and Erwin but still there is no guarantee they'll manage to convince two of the most dangerous people in the walls to let this go."

Eren narrows his eyes. "What do you want?" he asks again.

"My titan can't make it to the ocean, yours can. And besides, right now, you and I have a much higher survival rate if we join Reiner."

Eren slams his hands to the bars, they shake and the sound stops Ymir from saying anything else. "WHAT!?"

"Oof, calm down, big tooth. Think of this rationally."

"What sort of rational thinking is going to convince me to join Reiner and that beast?"

Ymir sighs loudly. "Well, for once, if the scouts can dispose of us that easily, don't you think they'll kill Historia and all your precious friends next time?"

Eren shakes his head. "And somehow Reiner is the better option?"

"Believe me... I know some stuff."

"Well, I won't. And if you're planning to use my titan to escape--"

"Well, that's gonna be a pain, because I can slip away from here but escaping the walls with Historia is going to be a pain."

"Are you seriously dragging her in your half baked plan?"

"Why do you care, big tooth, I--"

The iron doors burst open, the sound echoes down the corridor and makes Ymir shut her mouth. Feet skip down the stairs until Eren can see Hange and Moblits silhouette in the dim light of the torches.

Hange steps forward, from her shadow, Eren can guess they are standing in front of Ymir's cell. "My my my, Ymir, it's not polite to run away."

"Section commander Hange!" Eren whispers, when their voice confirms it's actually Hange.

Hange skips their steps until they stand in front of Eren's cell too. "Well well well, you look really bad. You both do. Maybe I should conduct a research about titan shifters and being deprived of sunlight--"

"Section commander." Moblit says, a warning tone in their voice.

Hange rubs their forehead. "Oh. Oh dear. You're right Moblit. I almost forgot why I came here!"

They put their hands on their hips and look at Eren inside his cell. "Ymir, Eren. I have good news. We will let you out and resume your life under a scout in one condition."

Ymir arches an eyebrow. "And what's that?"

Hange stares deep into Eren's jade eyes.

They grin widely.

Hange's office, as usual, was littered with maps and notes. Now that Moblit is still alive, it has some resemblance to a high ranking officers office. In a few years, it'll lose the little appeal it has.

Armin opens the door expecting to see complete chaos and an empty office but it's rather full. Jean, Sasha and Connie lean talk to each other while Eren silently stands, leaning against the wall.

"Eren!"

Eren lifts his head, shock paints his face and then he looks down again, he frowns a little and doesn't answer Mikasa's call.

Connie puts a hand on Eren's shoulder. "In the flesh! Operation 'save Eren's innocence' is now complete." he yells. "Tell them Jean! You did all the work."

Jean crosses his arms over his chest. "I didn't do much..."

"Please skip to the important parts." Armin says, impatiently. "Why was Eren Freed?"

Sasha bitterly. "Well, Ymir's words were proven *and* it turns out Eren isn't from outside the walls after all when Shadis brought evidence that he was born, raised and practically lived all his life without contact to the world beyond the walls before Shiganshina."

Mikasa glares at Eren. "Shadis??"

Eren touches the back of his neck awkwardly. "Yeah... Don't worry, Mom doesn't know yet. Shadis doesn't either. He just... Gave it when commander Erwin asked."

Connie slams his hand into Eren's back. "Come on now! Your stepdad did something for you--"

"Not this argument again!" Eren shakes his head.

"Don't get sidelined!" Jean snaps, he takes a deep breath and his eyes lock with Armin's. "As far as I was informed, Commander Erwin wanted to turn the titan you brought... The one that helped Eren control the titan... As his test subject to turn into a titan shifter."

Armin hums, he rubs his chin thoughtfully. "That makes sense..." he says. "It's the simplest solution to turn the oddest pure titan we found."

And the solution looks just as simple. Eren is here and Ymir isn't. In simple theory that means she was sacrificed. That also might explain

why he's acting somewhat awkward.

Armin can't help but feel a pang of guilt in his chest. Historia definitely isn't feeling very well. That explains why she's not here.

Before Armin can ask, the door to Hange's office creaks open. Suddenly, all eyes stare at Hange and the helpless woman she brings with them. "Oh, oh, mind your step..." Hange says.

Armin tilts his head. Dinas looks down but from the shake of her limbs, Armin can say she isn't in peak physical condition. In the other stunned silence, Hange and Moblit lead her to sit in one of the chairs inside Hange's office.

That's when Dina finally lifts her face.

Her blond hair is disheveled, her blue eyes are empty from life and they look very confused at the state of everything around her. The dark bags under her eyes show off all the stress she's been for the past 17 years as a pure titan.

She lifts her head and offers a polite smile to the new group of people around her. "Good evening e-everyone." she says, her hand massages her dark eyes, her voice cracks.

Armin takes a deep breath. He pushes his hands into his pockets and stares at Dina Yeager...

... Is that even the name she introduced herself here?

Hange looks at their squad. "Alright everyone." they say. "Say Hello to Dina Yeager."

"YEAGER?" Sasha and Connie say at the same time, they glare at Eren from the corner of her eyes. Eren rolls his eyes and steps back.

"That's right. For now, none of you are allowed to leak a word about Dina until further notice. Until then-- She'll stay with us." Hange

orders. "Dina, we need to show you to the commander of the scouts on a later date. For now, let me introduce you to my squad."

Hange points at Moblit. "You already know Moblit. You saw Eren when you first transformed back. Let's start properly, this is my apprentice, Armin Arlert..." she says, pointing at the blond.

Armin waves.

"Jean Kirstein, commander Erwin's apprentice, and his close friends, Sasha Blouse and Connie Springer." Hange points at the three. Sasha and Connie give her the warmest smiles.

"And Mikasa Ackerman." Hange says finally.

Mikasa strictly nods.

Dina smiles fondly, like an old woman who has just done a favor for them. Considering her actual age, it wouldn't be too out of character for her to act like a grandmother. Her tired blue eyes look at Eren for a moment, lost in thought. "I... I know you..." he whispers. "Sorry, my memories are very very unclear. What was your name, young man?"

Eren rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. "Yeah well, I'm Eren Yeager." he says. "I think we're somewhat related... I guess."

"... Yeager?" Dina asks, looking at Eren with questioning eyes. "*Eren Yeager* ?"

Eren looks around, he just receives his friends confused glances. Armin can't blame her. After all, poor Dina Yeager just noticed she has a step-family now.

Eren nods, "yeah well. I guess." he adds hesitantly. "It was my dad's friend's name I think... That's what my mom says."

Dina's tired face crumbles. "Eren...?" he repeats again. "That's strange." she frowns, unable to keep her anger hidden.

Hange hums. "Alright, that looks like it rings a bell." they say.

Dina shakes her head. "I'm afraid not, Section commander. I do not remember anything beyond waking up here." she says. "Although... I do remember I was a nurse... Maybe if I'm introduced into a hospital I can start working again..."

Hange shakes their head. "We'll have to wait until your memory returns, then." they say as a matter of fact. "Your presence here proved what Ymir was saying was true and we had to free Eren and Ymir. But there is still a lot of unanswered questions we need to answer and you're the key..."

Dinas eyes widened.

Then she slowly nods.

Hange snaps their head at the squad, "Dina is going to stay with us. Eren, you and her will have to show us what you meant about controlling other titans. When she was a pure titan." Hange explained. "You'll be called forth soon."

Armin doesn't miss it.

It's small, almost non-existent, but then Dinas eyes widen and her gray eyes sparkles before it fades to nothing. "What about... Controlling titans?"

Eren opens his mouth to explain but Hange shuts it down. "We'll explain further. But now, please think again and say anything you remember." they say.

"I don't remember anything yet... Not much further than what I told you, general." Dina says, shaking her head.

"Section-commander..." Hange corrects gently.

"Section -section commander."

At that moment, the door is knocked and opened by Hange's order. Historia walks in and salutes.

Armin arches an eyebrow.

Ymir is probably dead. Has to be dead. Then why does Historia's face look almost happy? With no traces of tears?

Dina's eyes meet Historia's.

She smiles, beaming at the woman. "Miss Dina! You're awake." she says. "Anything to say?"

Armin stares at the familiar exchange between the two. Armin narrows his eyes suspiciously. What's happening? Historia should hate with all the fabrics of her being but--

"I'm afraid not, Historia dear... My mind is a heavy blur."

Historia smiles at her. "It's alright, Miss Dina." she reaches out for her to take her hand and help her to stand up again. "You will be safe in the scout regiment."

Historia freezes when their hands touch.

And all color leaves Armin's face. He fists his hands around his papers, almost ripping it in half. *Damn it*, how can I have missed this! Historia and Dina are both from Royal blood and their memories can transfer through touch.

Armin swallows hard.

Doesn't matter, Historia has no idea what these mean anyway. There's little chance any memory was moved anyway.

Before their questionable silence causes the other's attention, Armin steps in and puts a hand on Historia's shoulder. She snaps out of her trance and turns her head to see Armin smiling. "It's alright." Armin assures both Historia and Dina. "We'll be fine."

now, the worst thing is...

Dinas gray eyes are completely focused on Historia. She stares at her without blinking. She opens her mouth to say something and then immediately closes it.

she knows.

Armin's blood freezes in his veins.

Dina knows Historia is also from royal blood.

and from the looks of it... She has known it for a while, Historia is surprised, Dina isn't.

Armin clicks his tongue, he rubs the side of his face. Historias cool reactions is giving him a headache.

Why is Historia so ok with everything ?

Armin wonders.

maybe she just moved on from Ymir faster than she did last time.

"So uhm, Armin was it?"

Armin nods sharply. "Yes-Yes, ma'am!" he says. "Is something wrong?"

Dina tilts head. "Were you born with purple eyes, young man?" she asks.

The oddly specific question knocks him off. He wasn't. In fact, his new purple eyes are fairly recent and he has yet to find out the reason his eyes have turned from blue to purple. The same shade of purple Eren had when he was in contact with the paths and the powers of the founding titan. He narrows his eyes at Dina. So she isn't exactly forgetful.

He shakes his head. "No, it's something that happened recently." he answers.

She hums. "And as far as I was told... You are the one who could control titan while having physical contact with me is that correct?" she says, her blue eyes search for something in Eren's jade green ones.

Eren nods, very slowly and hesitantly.

Dina rubs her forehead. "This is getting so confusing..."

Armin takes a deep breath. He turns to Hange and spits out the first excuse that comes to his mind. "Section-commander... Can I be relieved from my duties for the afternoon, I need to look after my grandpa."

He needs to think about the effects Dina Yeager might have. And he needs to know how to manipulate them better. He can do none of that while being questioned by this unknown variable like this.

"Me too, please. I need to check on my mother. And..." Eren clears his throat. He turns to Armin, his jade green eyes struggle to meet Armin's gaze.

We need to talk.. . He mouths. Armin can't possibly think what can be wrong.

Hange gives them the permission with a wave of her hand. Hange keeps talking about the importance of what Dina might remember. Eren immediately takes Armin's elbows and pulls him after himself. "Something... Has happened..." he says, while his eyes are on the ground. "Let's go out... I'll tell you just--"

Armin wants to ask what's wrong, but he doesn't. The silence gives Eren enough time to form whatever he's struggling with.

So Armin will wait until they're alone. How bad can this be?

Armin's eyes travel to Hange's room one last time. Time slows down when his eyes catch the glimpse of some titan crystals. Hardened icy crystals that are on a shelf in Hange's office. Something he didn't notice because of the chaos.

Armin sees the crystals.

Titan Crystals...

His eyes widened. He wants to grab them and see if they're the crystals from Annie. He knows the texture. He remembers it from the last timeline, how it felt under his fingertips.

He needs to make sure this isn't Annie's crystal.

Calm yourself down!

even if she is somehow in her shell-- they have no way of breaking it!

The doors open at the same time.

And Ymir walks inside.

Armin freezes on the doorstep. He stares at her face, stunned to the core that she's here, *alive*.

Her eyes look around his face. She rubs her jaw and tilts her head to the side. "Don't test my patience, My jaw hurts enough to get angry at the entire world." she snaps. She pumps into Eren on her way in.

"Ymir, did the painkillers not work?" Historia asks, rushing to her side.

"Not when you're used like a nutcracker they won't." she whispers, still rubbing her sore jaw.

Armin feels his blood freeze in his body, he looks at the two from the corner of his eyes. Only Eren's on time movement stops her from jumping at Ymir and demanding what they've done.

Eren grabs his elbow and pulls him out of Hange's office, still in shock.

"What's wrong with him?" Dina whispers, covering her mouth so that only Historia can hear.

Historia presses her mouth to a thin line. "Someone very special to him... Betrayed us and died." She says as vaguely as she can. "I think he'll have trouble accepting that."

Armin heard them even with the door shut. He gathered his thoughts when the door shut closer. He pulls his hand back. For a moment, Armin's eyes saw red. "Who?!" he yells. "Who did you feed her!?"

Eren shuts his eyes. "Im sorry, I had no idea--"

"WHO!?"

Eren gently gathers his hand into his own. "Come with me. I have no idea how else to break this news to you..." he says seriously. He takes Armin's hand into his own and pulls him down the corridor. Armin follows him like a limb body. His mind feels numb and overworked at the same time.

He doesn't see the corridors Eren pulls him through. All he notices is the metal door of the dungeons as it opens. The sound pulls at his ears. Eren leads him through the first door and into a place that looks very suspiciously like a stinking morgue.

The soldiers lit two extra torches and left them alone with a white piece of parchment over a bloodied pile of crystals and body parts.

Armin opens his mouth to say something but nothing but a short gasp leaves his lips.

His purple eyes stare at the bloodied crystals that once formed a protective shell around Annie.

His feet buckle, no longer able to keep him upright and he falls to his knees. He buries his face in his hands and screams but no voice comes out of his throat.

He was wrong.

So, stupidly wrong.

Annie was--

Annie was--

Gentle hands wrap around his shoulders and pull him into a hug from behind. "It's ok..." Eren whispers into his ear as his body shakes violently. If only he had more emotions to pour out.

From the little glimpse he got from under the white sheet, there is nothing much of Annie's body left after being cracked out of her shell from Ymir and eaten by Dina Yeager.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Somewhere in the globe, there is a man waiting for a daughter that will never return.

It makes his whole body shiver. Their memories march in front of him, guilt and regret clutch his heart and stop his lungs from breathing.

"It's ok. It'll be alright." Eren insists. His hold on Armin's body feels warm but shifts to burning hot when Armin remembers he was there. He was there when Annie was killed.

Armin doesn't have the energy to push him off, to yell, to shout, to grieve. He can only lift his head and stare into the dark stone wall in front of him. "Did you know?" Armin asks him, venom dropping from his eyes.

Eren swallows hard. "It happened so fast, Armin, Hange was--"

"That's not what I asked, Eren. Did. You. Know?" his voice shakes with watery gasps as he asks.

Because how could such a thing happen right under his nose?

Eren pushes the weights off of his mind with a few simple words. "I didn't." he says.

He lets go of Armin and turns him around to be face to face, he grabs the others shoulder to keep him closer. his jade eyes don't look away or his ears don't turn red like he always lies. Eren's hands stay secured on his shoulders, he inches closer again. "I didn't know. I was taken by surprise." he repeats. "You *know* I would have told you If I knew beforehand, don't you, Armin?"

Armin shuts his eyes.

His lips tremble.

Against his hardest defenses, the first tear rolls down his face a moment later.

So how was it?

I couldn't wait to intruduce Dina, honestly. Annnd get rid of the warriors for the next few chapters before an explosive return.

@[Rose_lily_sun](#)

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happyyyyyy :D

I stayed the same but you have changed.

Chapter 15: I stayed the same but you have changed.

Armin needs time.

Dina has to face the facts, and a certain new wife of Grishas.

And Eren gets caught in the crossfire.

Well well well look who's here!!

I wrote one(1) torture flashback scene and my hands were almost shaking. What the hell am I going to do when I have to write an entire chapter ****spoiler**** of Armin getting tortured by the marleyans some chapters from now? Sighs.

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

torture flashback. References to noncon/rape. Dina didn't have a good time under the marleyans. If you want to skip it, start from the ° °° signs and skip that entire section entirely until the ===== signs where the next part begins. Read safely<3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

In the past three days, Eren frequently finds himself behind the closed doors of his and Armin's shared room.

He always raises his hand to knock but he never does. He reminds himself to give Armin the space he desperately needed since he came back to camp and shut himself inside this room.

Not even Mikasa could get him to open the door.

But now, it's been three days. Any more absence and section-commander Hange might grow wary of them.

So Eren summons all the courage he has and knocks on the door with the back of his hand.

Knock Knock Knock.

"Armin, are you in there?" he asks softly, leaning against the door. "Armin can we... Can we talk?"

No answer comes from the other side. Eren presses his ears to the door to listen inside. He can't hear much, other than the rustling of fabric and a loud deep sigh.

Eren takes a deep breath. He presses his forehead against the hardwood. "Armin, will you talk to me, please??" he whispers. "Listen... I know it's--" Eren stops himself from completing it.

Armin doesn't answer. He can't.

Eren laughs awkwardly. "Mikasa and Sasha want me out of their room." he laughs, letting his hand slide down. He closes his eyes and embraces the coldness until it warms on his forehead.

"Armin, please tell me you're ok, at least." Eren whispers. "Can you open the door? I... Understand if you need more time digesting the news." Eren says. "But remember... I'm with you, ok?"

Eren feels the vibrations of the footsteps on the wood but doesn't believe it until Armin actually opens the door.

To Eren's surprise, he is in full scout regiment uniform, even his hair is combed thoroughly.

But the dark eyebags and his red rimmed eyes give away at his facade.

Armin smiles but Eren feels like he's just showing his teeth. "Hi Eren..." he whispers. "Sorry for being... MIA..."

Eren swallows hard. "Are you Er... Ok?"

Armin nods. "Both you and Ymir are..." Armin smiles, his eyebags make it look tragic. "You are still under suspicion... I need to clear that up before it backfires."

"I think you need to rest..." Eren whispers. He puts his hand on Armin's shoulder and squeezes three times.

Armin sighs loudly. He shrugs Eren's hand off with a smile. He doesn't say anything as he moves away, Eren is left to watch his back.

He walks so... Easily...

Eren doesn't understand if it's because Armin is in denial or he's healing.

Sometimes Dina forgets where she is.

It's been three days since she got her body back and yet... She wakes up in her bed wondering why there are no light bulbs. She automatically wakes up to go and prepare Zeke for his day, to wake Grisha up or get ready for her job.

Her heart skips a beat every time she opens her eyes and realizes she's not in Marley, not near Liberio. For all she knows, Zeke can be an adult now, and Grisha is nowhere in sight.

But the most striking difference is in the air.

The air is clean, refreshing, calming and soothing while Marleys was polluted and rich in smoke.

Today, Dina's feet took her to the grasslands and meadow near the headquarters, right next to the castle that looks like it's made from clay.

Dina looks at the morning sun lazily moving in the sky, then her wrinkled eyes fall to the ground, to a small five petalled white flower. She cannot remember its exact name but it was a lily... A white lily. She kneels down to see it more carefully, and her hand reaches for it. Dina touches the flower, immediately pulls her hand back when the softness touches her skin.

The flower bounces back on the wind.

The autumn wind pushes her hair back and Dina can do nothing but lift her head. The wind smells... Pure.

No smoke.

No smell.

Just pure air, the smell of freshly mowed grass and the sun dancing in the area.

Dina sits down and then lays down, throwing her hands in above her head and simply filling her lungs with this precious clean air.

Her gray eyes stare at the cloudless clean sky. It makes her smile. The last time she saw a sky as peaceful as this one was when she was very young, and still had parents.

"Don't forget. Never forget who you are..."

Dina's eyes soften. A bird flies over the sky as he remembers her parents' final words. Before they fell in the well they dug for

themselves with that failed coup of what was left of the royal family.

Dina can't blame them, can she?

She fists the grass in her hands, then lets them go. "Hah, guess I really am in the island..." she laughs. "I've been here for..."

Dina closes her eyes.

"I've been here for... A while now..."

Dina slowly closes her eyes. The years as a titan have had a toll on her senses, but nothing can ever compare to the numbness of not knowing what to do now.

She has always been the bridge. The bridge to the knowledge for the resistance/patriots. The bridge to have Zeke as their savior.

In none of their plans was *she* the last one standing.

Dina can't even bring herself to keep thinking about their last moments on that bridge, Their screams as they turned into titans, Their last begging and pleading--

Dina closes her eyes.

For all of Grisha's masterful planning and Zeke's great sabotage...

this was never meant to happen.

"I TOLD YOU I DON'T KNOW!!!"

Zeke holds up his hand, the eyes he inherited from her stare lifelessly and out of focus.

Dina doesn't remember what he said.

All she knows is the police officers who kicked her and Grisha to the ground before arresting them.

"It's been a while since we've had a woman here..."

"Careful, this obsession of yours is gonna get you killed."

"Like what? You're acting like it's going to have consequences."

The soldiers' words were followed by a laughing chuckle.

Dina fists her hands on the chair she's strapped to, it reopens her wounds and her pulled out nails bleed again.

"Take your time mate. Although if I were you, I'd probably wait until she can really feel it."

The door cracks open. Dina has to shut her eyes because of the assault of the light on the other side of her cell, but she still hears the man working with his belt.

"the king lied! He will never activate the rumbling! Even if you attack his walls." Dina spills, fear wraps his cold hands around her neck and forces her to spill out the words.

It's pointless. At least-- At least it'll be over quicker. She prefers to be a mindless titan than whatever torture they have prepared here.

But their expressions don't change. They keep pressing on who the owl is. Keep asking the same questions, as if Dina didn't just give them more reasons to attack paradise island.

And none of them thought to ask so why do you know?

They bore easily. Dina's last thought as her head is covered is 'thank Ymir'.

They didn't believe her. Or they didn't choose to believe her. What part of the king's masochist plan made sense for the Marleyans to believe her.

The next time she opens her eyes... This will probably be over.

"I promise... No matter what form I take..." Dina smiles. A needle pierces the nape of her neck. "I'll come and find you..."

She doesn't have the energy to drop her smile as she's kicked down the dam. The world spins around her head, the sky falls down and the ground rolls up.

Grisha's scream of her name is the last thing she remembers hearing, before the piercing warm sound of lightning.

Mind doesn't work the same in pure titan form. Neither do the senses. People are headless, limbless forms of a delicious smell and her body is nothing but a fluffy pile of meat she can't feel.

Why is she here?

For most of these years, all she can remember is Zeke's face as he held his finger pointed at his parents. All their ruined plans. All their carefully crafted dreams that he shattered with one point of his fingers.

I was never meant to come here.

I was never meant to come here.

But why...

Who said that?

*What was the word for it? When you lose hope and yet there is this one shred left in you that keeps you going? This need need **need** to do something. When your life depends on it but the object is too little too far?*

She can sense it. The people on the other side, the smell of them attacks her senses and she knows knows knows they're less than ten meters away from her.

But something stops her. Something hard and unbreakable and unclimbable.

Until one day, the scent changes its paths. Dina follows it almost happily. The smell of freedom is right under the tips of her fingers. The smells struggle, scream, cry but she doesn't hear it. Some of the smells are better than others. Some smell of sweat and mint and alcohol swabs and--

Dina follows Grisha's scent. It's not it exactly but she follows it anyway until she finds it under a pile of rubble. She is so happy, she wants to eat it.

This time, she can't.

Dina keeps following Grisha's scent.

Someday... She will find it again.

Ah...

The word is desperate.

When Dina can see again, she can't believe it at first.

No longer the scents or small balls of fire here and there but actually see.

And she sees Grisha's eyes.

Her eyes don't open completely. The thrill of air on her shredded skin and the tired ache in her bones stops her from seeing the face clearly in the heavy steam around her anyway.

She falls, because after so long, her body can't hold herself up anymore. A young man catches her and when he lowers her down, Dina sees nothing but Grisha's eyes.

A Grisha that looks 17 again, somehow.

"It's ok, Ma'am." 'Grisha' says. Dina's eyes close again not long after she realizes the boy Grisha's eyes isn't really Grisha.

Dina opens her eyes again.

She doesn't move her hands from above her head and doesn't move even when she feels the ants walk on her hair.

She just stares at the sky.

The sky...

It's so...

Blue.

"She's... Sat there for hours now." Eren whispers. He leans against the window frame and just stares down at her.

Dina can't see them from up here in the watchtower. But Eren can.

Maybe it's their shared family name. Maybe it's the fact that Eren has seen her someday in a past life but can't exactly pinpoint it. Whatever it is, Eren can't let her wither away like this.

Hange, his only companion right now, looks at Dina's still body with more curiosity than worry. "Maybe it's a Yeager trait. Have you found out what she is to you? Maybe a long lost uncle's second step-cousin thrice removed?"

Eren sighs. "I don't know any relatives. It's always been my dad, mom and Mikasa."

"Whatever it is. I hope it doesn't make controlling titans awkward for you." Hange says thoughtfully.

Eren arches an eyebrow. "Uhm, section commander?"

Hange waves their hands and laughs. "Listen, I have to make sure you know what we're up against." They remind him. "Remember why you insisted on turning her back to human?"

"I merely offered--"

Hange clears their throat. "It was a good offer buuuuut--" they held up a finger. "I still want to experiment with this controlling titan thing. I can't just let that slip. I think trading her for Annie was the best choice I ever made!"

By the mention of Annie's name, Eren tenses up. He awkwardly rubs the back of his head at the thought of her last moments between Ymir's indestructible jaws.

And how Armin has shut the door of their room since they returned this afternoon. He sighs loudly.

Hange waves dismissively. "You're free for the day. Why don't you hang out with your friends? We can't have titan training when she's shell-shocked anyway.``"

Hange grins. "Have fun!"

Erwin doesn't need proof to be convinced that humans exist outside of the walls. He deep down knows it and believes his fathers theory to some degree.

What he needs is evidence.

Connie's springers calm and Ymir's theory are far more than what he imagined he would have.

But a way to prove titans are humans was never a part of the equations.

Nonetheless, Erwin laces his fingers together and listens to Eren's bizarre tale about what happened outside the walls again for the second time.

Poor him and poor Ymir, little do they know neither of them are going to meet their end tonight. Although if they were smart, they'd have a clue.

Eren talks and talks about what happened. Hange on his left and Levi on his right, they listen without fail. Mikasa, Jean, Sasha and Connie stand a few feet away and wait for it to be over. Ymir stands next to Eren.

The four who made it possible to sacrifice Leanheardt. It was Erwin's idea to keep Armin away from any matter concerning Leanheardt. However, Hange didn't like keeping him in the dark.

Surprisingly Eren finished his talk with something he never expected. "If we have to turn a pure titan into a human... Please consider turning back the smiling titan." he says, his jade eyes struggle to keep his eye contact with Erwin but he tries his hardest. "... Something about this titan... About this woman... Is triggering memories I never knew I had."

Eren sighs loudly. Saying them out loud is easier said than done.

From their eyes, the only person that believes him is Mikasa. Hange and Levi exchange worried glances while commander Erwin simply looks at him.

Jean, Sasha and Connie stay quiet.

"The memories are... They are my fathers." Eren says. "And that-- that woman is always present in them."

Hange rubs their chin. "Hum, ." Hange leans forward. "So-- You're saying the smiling titan was your father's... Girlfriend?"

Mikasa steps forward. "I wouldn't go that far. Dr Yeager would have told us about this woman if she was so significant." she jumps on. "I'm guessing it wasn't related to Dr Yeager at all. And the woman can be--"

"The relationship doesn't matter, brat. We have a titan volunteer, hooray. Now we have to throw a titan shifter in their disgusting mouth" Levi hits his fist against the table. "Alright alright. Since everyone's ignoring it."

Levi turns to Hange and Erwin with a frown on his eyes. "You're giving a titan a mouth. Are you ready to freaking hear what she-they-he-whatever has to say?"

It makes Erwin press his lips tightly against each other.

The commander has nothing to say afterwards.

Erwin replays the meeting in his head again.

Eren seemed so confident and Erwin hoped he would be able to identify her. He didn't, barely recognised her. However, the shared family name came as a surprise.

It dulls Erwin's interest. If they share the same name there is a possibility that the origin of humans who turned into titan can very possibly be from inside the walls and not the outside which he hoped.

But again, that is a long shot in the dark. The two scenarios are still just as likely. Nothing will be certain until they find definite proof.

His train of thought is interrupted when someone knocks on his door and enters with his permission.

Erwin expects to see a guard, soldier, Hange or preferably Levi but he is met with none other than Dina Yeager.

Hange told him she was more or less unresponsive, still digesting the information around her. That Dina has spent today in the meadow and now that the moon is shining, Erwin hopes she's in a better state of mind to provide answers.

Dina walks in, she removes her hoodie and narrows her dark gray eyes. She has a tray of two teacups and a teapot in her hand. "May I have a talk with you, Commander Erwin?" she says, straight to the point.

Erwin clenches his jaw and nods curtly. He points at the chair in front of him. She puts the tray on the table and pours herself and the commander a cup. She quickly takes a sip to calm herself down. "I know you're disappointed I couldn't answer your questions last time we met." she says, no apology in her tone.

She clears her throat. "My memory is back... To an extent and I can answer you." she says, she lowers her cup to the table. "Firstly, I am not no one." Dina says, meeting Erwin's eyes with determination worthy of a warrior. "My name is Dina Yeager and before that, I was Dina Fritz."

Erwin doesn't react with his face. "Fritz and Yeager?" he repeats. This woman must be someone very brave to take the royal last

name for herself. "Fritz... As in the royal family?"

"Correct, And I have my royal sign to prove the Fritz part to you." she says, rolling up her sleeve until her elbow. She holds up her inner elbow for Erwin to see the tattoo of the Royal palace on her arms.

Erwin's eyes widened. He fails to keep his emotions in tact. He swallows back the endless round of questions that rise in his mind.

Dina smirks. "Oh, so you believe me now?" she chuckles. "Wait, I have more baffling things to say. That's why I brought the tea. This is going to be a long conversation full of secrets that I preferred to just say it directly to the man in charge."

Erwin presses his mouth to a tight line.

She takes a deep breath. "So I heard from section commander Hange that you're looking for Grisha Yeager's attic?" she asks. "I was quite surprised when I found out Grisha came all the way here..."

"You knew him?" Erwin asks, alarmed.

Dina rubs her chin thoughtfully. "Knew him? Grisha is my husband. And I think I know what he might have written in the cellar. Quite obvious now that I think about it." Dina says. Slowly, she meets Erwin's gaze again. "And I can tell you all the secrets of humanity... And more."

Erwin is above the clouds.

Dina Yeager... So that's why she has that last name!

Finally, finally.

Dina can't be from within the walls then.

That means--

Answers.

Erwin leans forward on the table. "Tell me." he says, his usually strict blue pleads with Dina. "Tell me the truth... Are there humans far away from the walls?"

Erwin's own enthusiasm surprises him.

The corner of Dina's lips pull into a humorless smirk.

"Why don't we have some tea? It's a tradition you know. To show you trust me. Where I'm from." she says.

Erwin arches an eyebrow. He's more than certain the tea is poisoned. But she drank it and hasn't been affected since. So that means Erwin will be conscious enough to hear what she has to say.

He takes the cup and hesitantly takes a sip, just to keep her talking.

She takes a deep breath. "Yes." she says. "And their number is far greater than you can imagine."

Erwin's eyes widened.

He slams his hands to the table in excitement. "Tell me." he demands, his lips spreading into a devilish grin. "What are the humans doing so far away from the walls?"

You're giving a titan a mouth. Are you ready to freaking hear what she-they-he-whatever has to say?

"I'm ready to hear it." Erwin demands.

Dina takes a sip of her tea, calm and collected. "Aren't you going to drink your tea commander? It'll be easier to talk about the conditions with some tea." she says, her eyes look at her cup and then his eyes, she fights the smirk in her eyes.

conditions .

The smile disappears from his face immediately.

"Conditions." he repeats. He takes his tea and spins it with a spoon. "We saved you from titans. You're human thanks to us. What conditions do you actually have!?"

Dina takes a deep breath. "There is a plan I need to make reality. People died to get someone here. It's just unfortunate that one person turned out to be me and not my son, however..." Dina shakes her head. "It is what it is. The plan needs to go on."

Erwin narrows his eyes. "What do you want in return?" Erwin asks. "Anything you ask, for the answers you provide."

Erwin doesn't want to sound so eager but for the first time since he stood on his fathers grave he can not wait for the answers he sacrificed so much for.

Dina hums thoughtfully. "My husband and I were going to restore the Eldian empire and save our people from those damned lives." she growls, her knuckles turn white as she squeezes the mug. "But my son... My pride and joy... Betrayed us."

Erwin narrowed his eyes.

Dina looked up at Erwin's eyes, her blue eyes burning. "I wanted to crown him the new king. It looks like I have to take it myself."

oh. So that's what she meant by plan.

and a son...

Erwin narrows his eyes. "You mean--"

"With the secrets I know, and your influence, this fake government can be overthrown." Dina says, smirking. "Once I am queen, you will have all the answers you crave. I will be leaving now-- I have places to be."

Erwin arches an eyebrow. Her boldness makes him smirk. "And what makes you think I'll allow you to leave."

Dina lowers her cup and gently cleans the sides of her mouth.
"Nine..." she counts.

Erwin arches an eyebrow, the simple act makes his head spin but he keeps his composure. "And what is Nin--"

"Eight." Dina counts down. "Ah the numbers? It's nothing. It's how much you have-- seven-- left until you fall back asleep commander."

Erwin moves to his feet but then-- his knees buckle and he falls to the ground, unable to support his weight.

Erwin gasps at the impact of his head to the ground.

"Six..."

Dina dusts her dark blue dress and pulls her hoodie over her face again. "Five..." she whispers as he kneels down, a wicked smile on her face.

"Never underestimate the effects of royal blood, Commander." Dina says. The commander's vision doesn't focus back on the present, or give him a good picture other than dancing circles.

"We will meet again, Erwin Smith. What you drank was just a little sedator. Don't worry, it'll wear off on its own. Can't say more, it's a Royalty secret recipe." she says, kneeling down to one knee.
"Remember my conditions. If you want the truth, you better have that throne ready."

She stands up again, Erwin's eyes fall heavily against each other. His ears shut down before he could hear Dina say "One..."

"Thank you Mikasa, without your help, I wouldn't have done this so soon." Jean whispers, he hugs the papers and thick books as hard as he can as they walk in the hallway from The library to the commander's office. Each one of those papers is endless hours Jean

spend browsing every little data they had about titans as such as Erwin had requested and working over the maps until the more senior members of the scouts could answer the question of "where would Dina have come from?"

Mikasa shrugs. "It was nothing." she says. "The sooner this is over the sooner we can uncover the secrets Dr Yeager had..." *and tell Carla, goes unsaid.*

"Either way I-- greatly-- appreciate your help." he says. He knows he looks bad with the dark bags under his eyes, but it's nothing a hard earned rest won't fix.

Jean knocks on the commander's door. He should be here, Commander Erwin is always here with the crack of dawn. "Commander Erwin?" Jean knocks on the door again. "I found the reports and maps you wanted!"

Silence greets him.

Mikasa hums. "Are you sure he's here? I don't hear anyone inside."

He knocks again and nods. "Yeah, he is always very precise about when and where he wants us to meet." he hits the door with the back of his hand this time. "Commander Erwin?"

"Let me, I'm telling you I don't hear anyone inside.." she looks at the ground and then her eyes widen. she pushes him away suddenly and presses her ear against the door.

She pulls back, a sudden frown on her eyes. "Jean, Step back, we must break down the door." Mikasa says as a matter of fact.

Jean blinks in surprise but he steps aside as told. He wants to ask why but Mikasa is faster, he kicks down the door with one swift kick. Mikasa narrows her eyes and kicks down the door again, the wooden door falls from the frame and falls down with a loud bang.

She runs inside and Jean runs after her the papers fall from his hands and scatter on the floor.

With the door gone, it's easier to hear the commander's hard breathing.

He freezes at the door when he sees Commander Erwin passed out and barely breathing on the ground. Mikasa kneels down and presses two of her fingers to his Pulsepoint. She sighs loudly and relaxes. "He's alive." she murmurs. Her eyes meet Jeans and she narrows her eyes. "I saw some dirt near the door and knew a normal soldier wouldn't just have dirt on their boots. Not near where captain Levi is... No one's that stupid."

Jean kneels down, he stares at Commander Erwin for a moment before he shouts for help from the guards. Commander Erwin needs medical attention. His skin is pale and cold to touch and his lips are open, barely breathing. At least he was steady.

Jean narrows his eyes. "You mean like a non soldier?" murmurs. "But no one is allowed here unless it's a bandit or--"

Jeans eyes widen. "Or Ms. Dina!"

It's not everyday Carla has a customer so early in the morning.

She has just finished cleaning the tables when a blond woman with blond hair and a hoodie covering half of her face walks in. Carla has seen stranger looking customers so she welcomes her with a smile. "Goodmorning, what can I do for you?" she says, she offers the closest table and to her surprise, the woman sits down without a word.

She slowly pulls her hoodie back and her calculating gray eyes scan Carla's entire body. She looks a few years younger than her. Maybe ten years or so. Carla keeps her smile even when her gaze becomes uncomfortable.

"Can I talk to you? It's about your uhm... Son... Eren." she says.

Carla blinks in surprise. "Eren, is-is he ok?" she asks.

"Well yes, my name is Dina and I need to... Confirm some things about his records." the blonde says.

Carla sits down next to the woman. It doesn't spark her suspicion because nothing Eren does surprises her anymore. "I'll... I'll be happy to help to clear up whatever confusion there is."

Dina nods, very slowly. "So- from the basics. Your name is Carla Yeager and His father is Grisha Yeager, right?" she asks.

Carla nods.

"Born in 835." Dina recites, her hands fist angrily in front of her. "Ok ok. Uhm, so there is a blank in his records. Do you know much about Grisha's family?" she asks, speaking through grit teeth.

Carla blinks in surprise. She wants to ask what relevance this has to the questions but she decides to answer her. "Grisha was suffering from Amnesia when we first met. He didn't remember much about himself other than his name and his job."

Dina hums. "What a convenient excuse."

"Uhm excuse me?"

"And his death?"

Carla presses her mouth to a thin line. "Grisha died from a bear attack. We... There wasn't much left of him to have a funeral."

Dina meets Carla's eyes again. This time, she fails to hide the angry storm in her gray eyes and her frown. "If he never remembered anything including from his family-- And excuse me if this question is too personal-- what made you trust him?"

Carla blinks in surprise. "Is this about confusion about Eren's records or Grisha's?"

Dina grinds her teeth together. "Please just answer the question."

Carla takes a deep breath. "Well, Grisha was good at his job and very kind to his patients. He selflessly saved the entire city when the plague hit. I think... I think someone as peaceful as Grisha couldn't have something undesirable in his background."

For a moment, Dina stills.

She blinks in surprise and stares at Carla like she's stupid.

Then, she laughs.

Her laugh is uncontrollable. Dina bends down and rests her head against the table, even hitting her fist to the wood a few times, all while her maniacal "HA HA HA" echoed around Carla's restaurant.

Carla looks around, noticing the careful looks Mr Arlert is giving. She gently nods at him, the old man hesitates but eventually leaves the room.

"what an actor you were, Grisha! Oh great Ymir! Did you just use Grisha and Peaceful in one positive sentence??" Dina looks up, she gathers herself and wipes the tear from her eye. "How is that even--"

"I'm sorry-- did you know my husband?" Carla asks before she can stop herself.

Dina takes a deep breath, she wets her lips as she thinks, rubbing her chin a few times. "You can say that." she says finally.

Dina slowly pushes the chair back and stands up on her feet. She flips a dagger out of her dress and swings it in her hands, a look of murder in her eyes.

Carla's eyes widened. "What are you---"

"Miss Carla, did you know--" Dina clicked her tongue. "--You have named your son after the man who fed Grisha's sister to the dogs?"

"What!?" Carla stood up. "Who are you! What are all these lies you're telling me? Grisha had no sister!"

Dina's frown eases into a gentle smile. "Don't worry, you'll understand what I mean one day." she assures her. Dina stands up again, she dusts off her clothes and walks away without giving Carla much mind.

Carla stops her by standing right in her way. "Hey! You can't just say that and march out!" she yells. Now Carla notices the obvious gap in their heights, Dina looks down at her, arching an eyebrow.

"You can't stop me like that."

"Are you his family or something?" Carla insists.

"Or something." Dina whispers back. "Thank you, Carla Yeager for confirming all my suspicions."

Dina makes sure to bump into her as she moves away, pulling down on her hood.

Carla bites her lip.

What did she mean by that? What did she want?

what if... What if she's really a relative of Grisha's?

Carla stands frozen in her restaurant until the sudden sound of the doors hitting each other echoes around and Mr Arlert comes from the inventory. "Carla?" the old man asks. "Who was that woman? I heard something but I'm certain she has no affiliation with the scouts." he says.

Carla blinks in surprise.

The old man shakes his head. "No scout would just come up and ask these questions. You should report it to Keith or the authorities."

if not from the scouts then how did she know so much? Isn't Eren a normal soldier there? What's all this uproar?

Realizing the answer to these questions are all with that mysterious woman, Carla nods at Oswin Arlert and runs out of the restaurant. She goes right to where she assumed the woman went and ran a few blocks.

All that greeted her in all the corners was silence and a few thugs.

"What do you mean she's just gone??" Hange gasps. "Oh walls, that's-- that's awful!"

Hange runs their hands through their greasy hair and pulls it out. "Erwin Erwin Erwin please tell me you at least know where she went!!"

Levi clicks his tongue. "Quiet, four eyes! Your babbling won't get anywhere." he growls from his chair right next to Erwin's sick bed.

Erwin shakes his head. The effects of the poison are more or less gone. Other than the constant headache, he feels normal. "We need to find her," he says. "We can't put her on top of all of our problems."

"Well we can't not!" Hange yells. "I put all my effort into her!"

"Well you did wrong." Levi clicks wrong.

"Hange." Erwin says, a little too seriously. "Take your squad. Eren and Ymir need to be away from the MPs' reach until we get Dina back."

Erwin looks down in his hands. "Once we find her... She needs to give answers..."

"Eren, you have approximately three seconds to explain to me why." Historia says, kicking a nearby pebble. "Why did Hange sent you and I away again?"

Eren pushes his hands into his pockets. "It's not more of pushing us away, they gave us actual work you know--" Eren is quickly interrupted.

"To get rations from your mom's restaurant? Seriously?" Historia rolls her eyes. "Eversince Miss Dina went missing Hange has been acting strange again. What was this about the quarantine again? Why do they want to relocate us to Nowhere?"

Eren arches an eyebrow, he tries to keep his eyes on the people passing by until they've reached the restaurant. He shrugs. "Are you asking me because you think Armin has probably told me?"

"Yes."

Eren chuckles. "Fine. Hange wanted to test Ymir's abilities one more time before we relocate and that's why you and I were kicked out of the HQ."

Historia stops.

She turns around, fire burning in her blue eyes. "What..." she growls. "... Did you say?"

Eren raises his hands in his defence but doesn't stop. "Believe me, you're not doing Ymir a favor by running around like that." Eren tells her. "Trust Armin. He's one if the smartest people in the regiment and I believe Commander Erwin will trust his and Jeans judgment and eventually trust her again."

Historia crosses her arms over her chest. "I don't want to chit chat here while Ymir being used like a guinea pig.." She growls.

"Remember what you told me? Punishing yourself won't make it any better for your girlfriend." Eren reminds him.

"Duh! Forget all this! Let's just get it over with. What's so special about your mom's restaurant anyway?" she snaps.

Eren smiles. "It's not her restaurant, she just works there. And don't bash it. It's Somewhere I go whenever I need a break." Eren suddenly stops in front of a restaurant, a tender smile paints his face. "Come on in. I can already smell the food coming from the kitchen. Today, our squad is having the finest meal in town."

Eren opens the door for her and she walks in. The restaurant is full, with people chatting and talking in every corner.

Carla is not too far away. She's tending to one of the tables. She stops when her eyes see Eren and Historia. She excuses herself and walks to them. "Hello, Eren!" she says. A smile shines on her lips. She looks at Historia then. "Ah, Armin! Welcome back, long time no see." Carla hums. She whispers something under her breath and narrows his eyes. Then her eyes fall slightly lower than Historias face. A question mark forms in her eyes. "Did... Did something happen to you, Armin?"

Eren clears his throat.

He laughs awkwardly. "Er, Mom, *she* isn't Armin. this is my friend, Historia. We're here to get the food Hange was so generous to reserve for our squad." he explains.

Carla arches an eyebrow. "Sure, of course, take a seat." She turns to Eren with a strict smile. "Eren, can you come to the kitchen for a moment?"

"Sure..." Eren whispers hesitantly, but follows his mother without arguing.

Carla quickly closes the door behind her and walks over to a pile of small metal food containers. "Here is all, I have no idea why the scout regiment would buy from us but here you go." Carla says with a smile.

"Thanks." Eren kneels down to take them all but his mothers question stops her. "By the way, Eren. Is something wrong with the scouts?"

Eren looks at her from the corner of his eyes. It's the same certain but expressionless look in her eyes that would make his younger self spill all his secrets.

But now, Eren just smiles. "Well, yes, but why do you ask?"

Carla sighs and rubs the bridge of her nose angrily. "Did you break another law...?"

"Oh, mom!"

"And let me guess. Somehow, the girls were involved too." She says, crossing her arms over her chest. "Do you *have* to be friends with people who have some sort of criminal history?" Carla whispers under her breath.

Eren rolls his eyes. "Mom, I'm a scout, a noble life just doesn't suit me."

She steps back and cleans her hand with her apron and reaches to ruffle Eren's hair. "I just want your best, you know."

Eren smiles, he doesn't attempt to fix his hair again. "I know, mom." he whispers.

Carla smiles bitterly. "Get going now. And visit more often! Every time I see you it gets more stressful than the last time!"

Eren lifts the big pile of lunch boxes and nods. "Promise, Mom! See you soon." he walks out of the kitchen and closes the door with the

heel of his foot.

Historia takes a quarter of the pile, it's not much but the relieved weight makes it easier to move, and their wagon isn't too far away. They walk in silence until they are putting the lunch boxes into the wagon in an alley.

Then, like a click, Eren's body shivers and not from the cold.

He raises his head and looks around. The previously busy alley is now almost completely empty. His ears pick footsteps coming from up in the rooftops.

Eren blinks in surprise.

He looks around again, the alley looks darker now, for some reason.

"Historia..." he says.

She just hums as she pets the horses.

"I think Mikasa's paranoia might have rubbed off me." Eren whispers.
"But I think we're being followed."

"Uh, what makes you say that?" she asks.

"I don't know... Something's off about--"

But Eren doesn't get to finish his words. Something sinks into his neck. Eren blinks in surprise.

He touches his neck and it touches a cold dart. Even when he yanks it out of his neck it's too late.

Another one hits Historia in her neck again, right in front of Eren. He doesn't have the energy to even shout.

His body slumps forward onto the wagon.

Armin is browsing Hange's report from their experiments with Ymir when the news comes to him.

"Armin!"

Mikasa's voice breaks through his peace.

Armin shuts his eyes.

"ARMIN OPEN THIS DAMNED DOOR!"

He shuts the book.

Armin knew they wouldn't leave him with enough alone time to start thinking about where he went wrong.

But he expected Mikasa to leave him alone at least.

"EREN IS KIDNAPPED!"

That one sentence changes his mindset entirely.

Armin's eyes widened. "WHAT?" he shouts. He rushes to the door and opens it.

"I said-- EREN IS KIDNAPPED!" Mikasa yells in his face. "Eren and Krista-- I mean Historia-- were attacked on their way back to base." she says. "Commandant Shadis reported it!"

Mikasa grabs his collar and pulls him out of the room. "Get your head out of those books. We need to have a meeting with section commander Hange RIGHT NOW!"

Armin doesn't realize he's holding some of the reports as he runs after Mikasa. His mind runs on a thousand thoughts a second.

Eren and Historia... Kidnapped?

NO! IT'S TOO SOON-- IT'S TOO SOON-- ITS TOO--

No. Armin knows it. The timing is right. Correct, completely aligns with what happened.

I'm just a fool.

Mikasa opens the door to Hange's office. Of all the people in the room, Armin's eyes only see Ymir.

And he sees red.

you had one job! One job!

The reports fold under his hands as he glares at Ymir with as much venom as he can.

with you alive-- there is-- there is a chance Historia will actually eat Eren under her fathers influence.

"Armin..."

Mikasa's tone isn't gentle, it's just reminding him of reality. She puts a comforting hand on his shoulder and his chest freezes from inside out.

He takes a deep breath.

calm down...

Historia and Eren are much closer than they were back then...

Historia won't eat him... Right?

Sooo how was it?

My twitter is:

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Be the hero you weren't to us.

Chapter 16: Be the hero you weren't to us.

What happens when Eren is kidnapped?

God, I don't even know how I wrote this... I'm mentally in a very bad place right now and physically in a worse place considering most social media got banned where i live *sighs*

Enjoy, y'all!

No special warnings apply. Nothing farther than aot canon violence.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The fact that Captain Levi decided to have this bar as their meeting spot is suspicious.

The fact that the three of them decided to come here in disguises and hoods, makes it even worse.

Petra orders three beers and they arrive right with Captain Levi, who is just in his usual scout attire.

"Captain..." Eld says dutifully. He stands up and so do the other three. "How are your missions with commander Erwin?"

Levi sits down and so does the rest of his squad. Petra and Oluo exchange a look when Levi doesn't answer Elds initial question.

"Long story short, the four eyes squad messed up and we have to clean it before it gets out of hand.." Levi says. "Listen carefully. This isn't an official but something that absolutely needs to be done."

Levi briefs them on the details. The description makes the beer taste bitter and gross in Petras mouth. She just wishes to finish her life without ever once hearing about the female titan again.

It appears luck is not with her tonight.

She slams her drink to the table without meaning to. "So let me rephrase this, captain." Petra whispers, "the operation with Dina Yeager was successful, only for her to run away and for Yeager to be kidnapped very soon after?"

Levi takes a sip of his tea. "Correct. And since the three of you are the only people we can trust to defeat the female titan if the situation arises, Erwin ordered you to track down Dina Yeager and bring her back to custody."

Olou crosses his arms over his chest. "Is this because the lady doesn't officially exist?"

"That's right. And something else. You need to hide because Meanwhile, the scout regiment might be targeted. Hell, it is being targeted." Levi says, "either way our mission doesn't halt. We'll get Dina yeager before whoever kidnapped Eren does."

"Excuse me, Captain, but isn't this scenario entirely bizarre?" Eld asks. "I mean-- these titan shifters are sprouting from nowhere, and so far they can't be trusted as much as we assumed." Eld lowers his head. "Are they... Really going to help us free humanity."

"I don't know. Hell, I don't even know what's right or wrong about this anymore." Levi says sincerely. He points his tea cup at Eld and then stands up. "Eld, you're in charge. The last we saw of that woman, she was headed towards Trost." Levi orders. "Now I have to go."

The special operation squad exchanged a look. They all nod at Levi at the same time.

"It's her father."

"How are you so sure?"

"I am!" Armin snaps. "There is no one that would want to get her other than her father. She's an illegitimate daughter after all, right?"

Hange narrows their eyes.

After so long, Armin understands when someone doesn't believe him. He takes a step back to lean against the wall. He promptly tries to ignore Ymir and the rest of the Hange squad.

Even now, he believes it was wrong to come here. In the middle of nowhere. The same house they resided in back when pastor Nick died and the MP had yet to run after them.

In the other time, Historia explained her backstory here. Now there was no Historia, and there was no Eren, But the MP would surely make a move.

"Even if you're right, Armin, we can't just go and get her!" Hange reasons. "We need to wait--"

Hange doesn't get to finish what she meant. In that moment, the door opens and Levi and Moblit walk in. Moblit waves a piece of paper in the air and then puts it in Hange's hands. "It's a message from Erwin." he says. "And when I was coming back. The MP were arresting commander Erwin. House arrest, to be exact."

Hange opens it, then their eyes widen. "We need to evacuate, now." they snap the order. "The MPs are coming here. Everyone, make sure your ODM is working."

Looks of surprise pass everyone's eyes. Connie jumps down from the boxes he was sitting on. "Is it stated why?"

"Crimes against humanity." Hange says.

Jean grinds his teeth silently. Hange orders Jean, Sasha and Connie to clear the traces of them here and Armin and Ymir to check their gas supplies.

Ymir crosses her arms over her chest. "If you don't want to go after her, just say it." she snaps at their commander.

"Finding Eren and Historia are a priority but not higher than our survival." Levi says as a matter of fact. "Now if you two--" Levi points his finger at Armin and Ymir. "-- Don't want to end up in an MP dungeon somewhere, get going."

Armin stomps his heel, he immediately fixes his behavior but doesn't turn around. He rushes down to the storage room, it keeps getting harder and harder for him to control the shake in his limbs.

calm down,

he tells himself as he makes sure two of the gas tanks are full.

Historia isn't going to eat him. She isn't that weak-willed.

"You better have a plan."

Armin stops. He straightens his back and looks back from the corner of his eyes.

Ymir is glaring daggers at him, her arms crossed over her chest. "You better have a plan." she repeats. "Because these people obviously don't."

Armin narrows his eyes. "I do." he lies. "Don't worry, it's already in motion. I can't do anything else for it."

Lies... Lies... More lies...

"I need to get going," he says. "And these tanks are full."

The moment he is outside the storage, he finds a piece of paper and starts writing on it. Jean catches him hiding it under the spoon and forks in the kitchen. "Armin, what are you doing?" he asks.

Armin grinds his teeth together. He covers all of that paper and his notes with the metal spoons. "Leaving a clue. For a certain someone." he says vaguely.

Jean's eyes widen. "Marco?"

"Yeah. I don't want him to be caught off guard." he says.

"EVERYONE! I can hear people getting closer." Sasha shouts from outside. Armin rushes outside. He notices that Jean also doesn't destroy the note he left for Marco.

Petra looks around the restaurant. It looks nothing new or abnormal. It's a normal restaurant with the smell of vegetables and beers in every corner.

The only thing she, Eld and You are looking for, is the waitress, who seems to do most of the work around here. "Are you sure this is the best route?" she asks Eld. "What if Dina didn't come here?"

Eld takes a big gulp of his beer. "If you woke up and found someone with the same last name as you, wouldn't you follow them?"

Petra pulled her hood back. "I see your point. But what if we just make her angry?"

"She's not the bloody captain Levi. So what if she gets angry?" Olou says.

Eld elbows the other man. "Just show your Scout badge and tell him you have news from Eren. I bet she's desperate for news. She doesn't know her son was kidnapped but she still knows we're being persecuted. She'll want to talk to someone with news about her children." he says. "And I have a feeling she'll be more trusting with you than the two of us."

Petra huffs. "Oh, fine. I'll shoot a shot."

She stands up and waves to get the woman's attention. "Miss Yeager?" she says. She pulls her hoodie back to reveal her scout badge.

Carla blinks in surprise. Eld can't help but notice the same expressions of shock on the woman's face. "Can I ask you a few questions in private?"

Carla nods. She shows the back door to Petra and she follows it.

A few minutes later, Petra comes out with a victorious smile. "Thank you for your information." she tells Carla and walks to the table.

"Ok, Ok..." she says, "I have a pretty good place to start."

Olou chuckles. "Good to see you smiling."

"Let's get out of here before the MPs think about asking about us and the disguises we were wearing in a restaurant." Eld points out as he stands up. "Fill us in on the way out."

Olou said it was urgent.

So Levi had to leave the soldiers accompanying hange to wait and leave this abandoned part of town. With stinky streets and squeaks of rats coming from all directions.

"You better have a good reason to keep me waiting here!" he says through gritted teeth.

"Captain Levi." Olou says before he jumps down from the roof. He doesn't want a beating because he took the captain by surprise. "I have news."

Levi nods. "What is it?"

"We followed Dina Yeagers trail. From Trost all the way to the lord Reiss lands." Olou says.

Levi arches an eyebrow. "Reiss?" he repeated. *well. Well. Well, it looks like Armin's guess wasn't so inaccurate anyway.*

"Yes. From what we saw, she's been working there as a maid for a short while now." Olou says.

"A maid?"

"Yes. Surprisingly. We found her there. She didn't notice us but it was truly her. What should we do next?"

Levi rubs his chin.

This further complicates things. "Keep it low. Follow her anytime she leaves those lands." Levi orders. "And be ready to take her back at any time. go back to Petra and Eld as soon as you can..."

"Yes, sir."

Olous ODM zips to life and he flies away.

Levi hits off the little dust on his clothes and walks away. He uses his own ODM to climb to the roofs, he runs to the place he has planned with the other soldiers.

Just to be welcomed with the sound of guns.

Levi runs as fast as he can, but he's late, when he arrives, someone is standing above the soldiers bodies and clicking his gun.

He pushes his fedora hat up and turns around to meet Levi. "He-Hey, Levi!" the man yells, crooking his gun. "Have you grown up yet?"

The words rip themselves from his throat.

"KENNY!!"

What made Eren open his eyes is the pain in his shoulders.

He feels his shoulders oddly stiff and painful. He tries to move them but he is met with the jungling of chains.

He opens his eyes with a gasp, to notice there is a metallic tube in his mouth. And who is he kidding? That is a muzzle.

Eren's jade eyes travel around the crystal cave he is in. The roof of which is easily 20 meters high, with Crystal support columns very close to each other.

wait... I know this place...

have I been here before?

"Eren, you're awake!"

Eren looks down, Historia stands there dressed in an all white robe. She doesn't seem to be bothered or hurt. Which is one good thing in this mess. "Don't worry, Eren. My father explained everything. He is not an enemy of humanity."

Eren can argue with that. What sort of friend of humanity would chain him up like this?

He can't voice it so he tries to convey it by pulling the chains, to no avail.

Historia somehow isn't phased. Eren wonders why she's so comfortable seeing him chained like an animal but he doesn't dare let the thought continue.

Historia's all right?

"Eren, listen to me." Historia says loudly. "My father has been an ally to

all of humanity within the walls, for many years past and many years to come. We were clearly mistaken about him."

Eren arches an eyebrow.

Is that the same father who left her? Who let her mother be killed?

What happened to all the 'sob story' she told back in those forests?

"It's true that he's been a problem for the

Scouts, and his people did attack the scouts." Historia reasons. "But he didn't have any other choice. Everything he's done, he had to do for the sake of humanity."

"Historia. Let me explain the rest." Rod Reiss walks in.

Eren narrows his eyes at the man. That's right. He remembers him.

It's coming back to me... Yeah...

The last thing I can remember is those two.

How long has it been?

Captain... Armin...

What happened to the Scouts?

What's up with these walls,

glowing like that...?

Eren looks around again, trying to get some information about his surroundings.

I can't tell if it's day or night...

"What's wrong? This is the first

time you've come here." Rod tells him. "Though, it wouldn't be strange if you recognize it."

What does he mean by that?

"Fa-Father, explain to Eren." Historia whispers.

Rod presses his mouth to a thin line. "Yes, I intend to. However, there's something

I want to try first." he explains. "If we do this, he may remember all on his own."

Rod walks up to the stairs. Historia follows him quickly behind. Eren can't see behind him until he feels two palm marks on his back.

And then-- lightning sparks in the back of his mind. *What... is this? These aren't things I've seen... No!*

Whose memories are these?!

"Well?" Rod pulls his head back. "Did you remember? Your father's sin..."

"Sin" Historia whispers under her breath.

Eren stares at Historia. He has nothing to say other than keep his head strictly down.

What do you even say to someone who has killed your sister?

"Father..." Historia whispers, looking back at her father. The man walks inside with a bag.

"Sorry to make you wait," he says. "Listen, Historia... This may sound very strange to you, but Frieda is not entirely dead."

"Huh?"

"The memories of Frieda still live on. Would you like to meet your sister?" Rod pulls out a syringe and fills it.

"Yes!" Historia cheers happily.

But then, Eren immediately recognises the syringe. He pulls against the restraints. He tries to scream out what he knows but the muzzle doesn't make it possible.

Historia looks back, an eyebrow raised. "What, Eren? Why are you glaring?"

"It's because... he has perceived his fate. That the stolen power will return to where it belongs." Rod says, he holds up the syringe.

"Historia... That means inside you."

Historia blinks in surprise.

"This cavern... It was built around 100

years ago by the power of a certain Titan. Those three walls were built by the same power." Rod explained. "By creating those enormous walls, humanity was protected. The power of that Titan reached out to touch people's hearts and alter their memories. However, several bloodlines were excluded from that. But their descendants and the rest of humanity... retain no history of the world

past a century ago. Except for one, Frieda Reiss. Frieda possessed more than her power as a Titan. She knew how this world came about and all the details behind it. She was 15 years old when

that knowledge became hers. Right here, 8 years ago in this very place... after she ate her uncle, my younger brother."

A sad look passes Rod's eyes.

"Frieda inherited the Founding Titan

and the memories of this world. As had been done for 100 years, repeated and passed through generations."

Historia fists her hands. "Basically, if Frieda had just used her power, there wouldn't have been any problems. We might have eliminated Titans from this world entirely." she mumbles.

Rod nods. "If only his father hadn't stolen

the power from her. Now, that power resides within Eren. However, that power... It can't truly manifest unless the blood of the Reiss family runs through them. As long as he remains a vessel for that power... this hell will forever continue."

The words spin a dagger in Eren's heart.

All these deaths...

All these titans?

Could have been avoided?

Historia seems to have reached the same conclusions. "Then..." she whispers, but is ultimately interrupted.

"Oi, Oi, Oi, Oi!!!!"

Rod narrows his eyes. "Kenny."

Kenny throws his gun in the air. "So unless it's a Reiss who eats Eren, they can't become a true king?"

Rod grinds his teeth. "That is correct."

"Th-Then... even if I turn into a Titan

and eat Eren, it'll mean nothing'?" Kenny yells.

"What are you--?" Rod doesn't get to finish. Kenny picks him up and points his gun at his forehead.

"Father!" Historia yells. She grips Kennys arms and tries to stop him.

"For crying out loud! You used me this whole time knowing full well what I was after, you sleazy playboy!" Kenny yells, pushing the pistol harder into Rod's head.

Rod's eyes stay calm. "I'm grateful for you. You may have been a stray dog that my whimsical younger brother took in, but--"

"Keep on insulting Uri, and you can

say goodbye to half of your head." Kenny shouts.

"Stop it! Let my father go!" Historia yells one last time. "Huh? You're plain pitiful, Historia. Don't you get it?!" Kenny throws Rod away, pointing his pistol at the man again. "This father of yours wants to turn you into a monster and make you eat Eren."

"Because that's my duty." Historia says confidentially. "I'm going to eat Eren and

bring my sister back. I'll inherit the world's history and exterminate every last Titan!"

Historia holds her fist to her heart. "That's my duty!"

"Hey, hey, Historia! Have you forgotten everything this guy has done to you?" Kenny rolls his eyes. "The only thing he cares about is the blood inside you. He doesn't wanna become a Titan himself. He's just trash that forces his brother and daughter to! That's this father of yours!"

Rod stands up, wiping the blood off of his lips. "He's wrong, Historia... I must not become a Titan myself. Do not believe... what anyone else says..." then he turns to Kenny. "Kenny. You've served well up until now. You're free now. Go find another purpose in life... and live out your years."

Kenny arches an eyebrow. "That would bore me to death." he says as a matter of fact. His ODM buzzes to life and he immediately rushes to Eren's side.

"Kenny! What are you doing?" Rod shouts, panik finally shows in his words.

Kenny spins his dagger in his hand. He pushes Eren's limb face up with his pistol and drags the blade across the other's forehead. "Go ahead and turn into a Titan. I won't interfere anymore. However, no head starts. You both become Titans and have at it." he orders. "If Historia wins, you'll have your peace. But if you lose to Eren, the situation stays the same. Keep drawing breath till I run out and die? Can you even call that livin'?"

Kenny yells. He lets Eren's head fall down and flies away. "Ride it out, fellas!" he laughs as he disappears behind them.

"Historia!"

Historia watches Kenny's bewildering exit. He disappears behind the columns. His fathers trembling hands bring her back to reality as he shoves the syringe into her hands.

"With this injection, you can become a powerful Titan!" he explains. "Then you can eat him, but in fact, it's more than that! You must bite

his spine and consume the spinal fluid!"

Rod steps back. "Hurry up, Historia!"

Historia narrows her eyes. She holds the syringe above her forearm and grinds her teeth together.

She'll turn into a titan. She'll resurrect her sister and make her family proud.

The ground shakes around her.

Suddenly, a roar of a titan reaches her ear.

Historia's eyes widened.

what was that?

Her heart sparked. "Is Ymir here?" she asks out loud, then her mind supplies her with the fact that Ymir's roar is much different than this one, and it looks like multiple roars.

And then, as soon as it appeared, there was no sound left. Leaving Historia wondering maybe she imagined it all.

She blinks in surprise, the silence makes her hesitate. She looks up at Eren and stares at his downcast head. "Eren, why?!" she whispers, slowly lowering the syringe until it was centimeters away from her hand. "Why aren't you transforming?! If I become a Titan, you'll get eaten!"

Eren mumbles something she doesn't quite hear until he lifts his head. Historia tilts his head, and Eren... Crying?

He opens his mouth, and his voice breaks. "Do it, Historia!" he shouts, before his voice breaks. "I shouldn't have happened..."

Historia steps back.

"Me..." Eren chokes. "My dad, too... If five years ago, he hadn't done that here... Your sister... would have been able to do something, right?"

Eren shakes his head, the blood and tears run down his face. "But my dad stole the Power of the Titans from its rightful place. Just how many died for that?"

Eren shakes his head. "Thomas, Nack, Mina, Milieus... Those soldiers on the scouts... The operation of hope... I can never atone for it all."

Eren swallows hard.

"It shouldn't have happened... Those days of training... That dream beyond the walls... I... shouldn't have happened." Eren looks down. "So, at the least... let it end at your hand."

"I ate my father..." Eren bites his tongue. "Mikasa was wrong. *Armin* was wrong. I ate my father. I killed him. I ate him. I'm- I'm nothing but a monster and I've kept this power from someone who could really use it--" he gasps.

His jade eyes look down and he shakes his head. "Eat me. Save humanity. It's all... up to you."

Her eyes softened. "Eren... That time... When you listened to all of our conversations in the woods. when you called me a normal person, I was so happy."

"And so was I..." Eren whispers. "Please end it quickly... And tell my Mom, Mikasa and..." Eren swallows hard. "Armin... Tell them I love them."

Historia narrows her eyes in disgust. "So you're trying to do something "nice," huh?"

Rod gets closer to her. "What's wrong, Historia? Are you scared? All you have to do is inject that liquid into your body." he took the syringe from her hand and held it close to her skin.

"Father..." Historia asks. "Why? Why didn't the Reiss family... in that whole 100 years... eliminate the Titans and liberate humanity? All while possessing the power

to control all the Titans..."

So Rod explains. He explains all about his family's history with power. Each word made Historia more and more disgusted. Until her father grabs her elbows and stares into her eyes. "What we call that... is God. And my duty is to bring God back to our world and offer them my prayers." he says. "Right now. I'm praying, Historia. For God to lead and guide humanity!"

Historia fists her hand and grinds her teeth angrily.

Krista .

Historia's eyes widen immediately.

I have no right to tell you

how to live your life.

So actually, this is nothing more

than a hope of mine...

I want you... to live a life you're proud of.

The power she needed flows through her body. She snaps the syringe out of her fathers hand. It falls to the ground and shatters.

"Historia!"

Then she kicks the old man down.

"God, my ass! You're just giving yourself

out and manipulating other people!" she yells. "I've had it! I won't let you kill me!"

To her surprise, Kennys voice echoes all around them. "That's the spirit! This is gettin' good!" he tips his hat for them.

Historia ignores him and aims for his father's bag. She runs up to the podium and fumbles with the keys she found.

"What are you doing, Historia?!" Eren yells.

"Eren, we're leaving." Historia yells. "Seriously? Leaving me to tell a bunch of people you loved them? That's too sappy of you, Eren."

"Hey, stop it!" Eren yells back just in time as one of the keys snaps. "If I go on living, everyone will keep suffering! Hurry up and eat me! I can't live like this!"

Historia hits his head as hard as she could. "Shut up, idiot! Just shut up, crybaby!" she yells. "Exterminate the Titans?! Who the hell wants to do that bullshit?! I'm starting to hate humanity!"

Historia pushes the keys in another lock. "Let them get wiped out by Titans! If that's it, I'm humanity's biggest enemy! Got it?! I'm the worst girl who ever lived!"

The ground shakes with a rumble.

Both of their attentions are snapped elsewhere, when the sound of titans come from the other side.

The ground shakes again, the roar of titans coming from the end of the cave.

Even Rod Reiss stops crawling to the broken syringe.

A cloud of dust ambushes them, dancing in the air until it disappears as fast as it appeared.

And in its wake, there is a woman with a black hoodie walking towards them.

"What happened??" Rod Reiss snaps at the figure, but then, it becomes painstakingly obvious the woman walking towards them is not one of Kennys henchmen.

She stops, moving her hands to remove the hoodie covering her head. Her dead gray eyes stare forward, she smirks. "Wow, that's pathetic, Eren." she says. "Reminds me too much of Grisha sometimes."

Eren's eyes widened.

It's Dina.

A ridiculous smile paints her face as she takes slow leisurous steps towards the altar. She raises her hands and starts clapping slowly. "Well, well, well, if it isn't my dear cousins."

Rod's eyes widened. "You-- what are you doing here?"

Dina grin is going to haunt their nightmares. "Yes, me." She raises her hands. "Who else would it be?"

Historia turns to her father, her hands stop trying to unlock Eren's hands. "Who is she, father?" she asks. "Is she an ally of yours?"

Eren can't take his eyes off of her.

Something...

Something about her face.

it's like a flash of thunder, an image passes Eren's eyes. Dina, it was certainly Dina, much younger and holding a blond child to her chest, whispering something in his ear.

Eren blinks in surprise.

What was that??

Dina barks an ugly laugh. "Ally??" she says. "As if I would side with people who left me with those animals back in Marley!"

"What are you talking about, Lady?" Historia shouts, loudly.

Dina tilts her head, not once slowing down her walk. "Oh, you'll remember. The moment I touch that boy again." her fingers point at Eren. "Everyone will remember *everything* . Even if I have to force it into your damned minds, I will!"

Dina looks around to Rod, who is trying to crawl to the broken syringe. She chuckles when her mind recognises the broken syringe. "Stubborn, I see." she laughs.

Dina stops.

She clears her throat and looks back. "Little giant! Why don't you come and help me here!" she snaps her finger. "Oh and please bring that old Ackerman."

The titan, a seven meter class, walks into their view, while holding an unconscious Kenny Ackerman in his palm.

Dina clicks her tongue. "What point is your ODM when you're not going to use it against titans?" she whispers. "Hold him, I don't need competition here."

The titan dives in. It catches Rod Reiss before he can get remotely close to the contents of the broken syringe. The titan holds a stunned Rod Reiss in one hand and an unconscious Kenny on the other.

Eren's jaw drops.

Even Historia froze. The keys drop from her hand. She stares, openly and shocked at the obedient titan.

"That's... The beast titan..." Historia mumbles, "How do you-- HOW DO YOU HAVE THAT POWER?" she yells angrily.

Dina pushes her short hair back. "Me?" she asks dumbly. "It's simple, really. I was born with that power, much like you two are." she laughs, the sound of her footsteps and monologue the only thing filling the dead atmosphere of the crystal cave. "I sneaked some of my spinal fluid into your resources when I sneaked into Reiss manor. You really need to run a background check on your maids, *Lord Reiss*."

She shrugs.

"When I screamed, all my titans came to me." is all she explains. "I would step away from Eren if I were you, Princess."

"No..." Rod Reiss gasps, "No... Historia you need to... God needs to... Return."

Dina immediatly stops in her tracks. "God...?" she repeats, her grey eyes wide and screaming murder.

Rod pushes himself up. "It's my duty... Father... Uri..." he says, not noticing the fact that his words are not aligning. "Frieda..."

Dina cracks her knuckles. "You-- you're getting on my nerves." she shouts.

"I need to-- I need to bring god back!" Rod yells. "I have to--"

"Fine! If you like it so much--" Dina growls angrily. "I'll send you to your beloved Carl Fritz. See you both in hell. Eat him!"

The titan doesn't move for a second, but then, he starts to eat Rod while he's screaming and thrashing uselessly. The titan bites down, and makes a show of swallowing the poor man.

Dina clicks her tongue. "Disgusting..." she whispers. "... Look what you made me do!"

Dina immediately points her finger at Historia, her hand visibly shaking. "Now, princess, if you don't want the same fate as your father, *move* ." she threatens.

Historia doesn't flinch. Eren has no power but to stay still and watch as Dina climbs up the stairs and comes dangerously close to them on the altar.

Historia turns around to fully face the dangerous woman. "What do you want to do with him?" she demands. "I can be your ally. Haven't you heard? the enemy of my enemy..."

Dina tilts her head. "Do you know, girl, what it means to be haunted for your blood?" Dina leans down. "Do you know what it means to live in secret, hide what you are? Pretend you're something else for the scum of the earth? Have your entire family killed in front of you? Fight and fight and fight and see people die because your ancestors failed to do something?"

Historia's eyes widened. "I- I do--" her hands start to shake. "If you-- If you don't believe me, I can show you."

Historia offers her hand.

Dina shakes her head and slaps Historia's hand away. "You can't possibly know--" she stops. The simple moment of contact was enough to make their memories collide.

Dina doesn't move for a moment.

Then she looks at Historia with nothing but pity. "Oh..." she whispers.

"See now?" Historia says. "I understand what you mean. And you should trust me, Eren isn't our enemy."

Dina doesn't raise her hand.

The whisper of "Little giant..." leaves her mouth and the next, the titan is jumping to catch Historia and holds her tenderly.

Historia tries to get out. "No, DINA!" she yells, struggling in the titans palm.

Dina's eyes soften. "I'm sorry, princess. But this is a personal matter. Be kind to her, little giant." she warns the titan. "She doesn't need to pay the price of a sin she doesn't uphold."

Dina then turns to Eren, she slowly shakes her head and reaches his hand to Eren. "I will kill and eat you now." She warns. "However, let me see something for myself first..."

Eren tries to get away from her touch, but the chains are relentless and the moment he thinks about transforming, Dina's hand is already touching his back.

And lightning passes Eren's eyes.

Eren opens his eyes.

He's standing in his old home. His family's home in Shiganshina. Eren knows the layout, the scent, the looks of it and it all aligns with his *home* .

He hears the cries of a child and his mothers laughter. His eyes widen, his mother is so much younger and his father is playing with a

baby.

is that me?

"Wow, what an actor."

Eren snaps his head to his right. Surprisingly, Dina is there too. She leans against the wall with her arms pushed into her pockets. "What a joke. What a joke. Grisha knows very well how to handle a baby. He did it when I was sick. All the time." she spits out the words with venom.

Eren arches an eyebrow. He looks at his freed hands once and then back at Dina. "Where are we? What do you want from me?" he asks.

Dina looks at Eren from the corner of her eyes, a sad smirk falls on her lips. "You? I don't want much from you. Just the truth. I want to see the truth before I eat you and get the founding titan."

Eren steps back.

She chuckles. "What happened? Weren't you comfortable with the idea of being eaten a few moments before? Saying that you killed your father and whatnot?"

Dina waves her hand and the scene disappears, instead, they are in a house much different. Much darker and more minimalist. "Why don't I show you the truth, Eren. And then, you'll show me your fathers truth?"

"Who the hell are you, and why are you so fixated on my dad?" Eren yells.

Dina says nothing. Eren's questions are answered when a blond boy, maybe five or six years old, passes through their ghost-like bodies and opens the door in front of them. "Mom! Dad!" he cheers.

Eren's jaw drops to the floor when he sees a younger version of his father and Dina on the other side of the door. The blond boy rushes

to hug Dina and Grisha ruffles his hair.

"No that's--" Eren manages to say.

"--Impossible?" Dina chuckles. "Very much possible. You see Eren... I suppose I should welcome you to Marley."

Dina walks out of the house. Eren doesn't understand. He stares blindly at the boy and Grisha as they set the table. The boy looks too young. Maybe four or five years old.

Is that true...

Did dad have... Another family?

"Aren't you coming? Do you want to know what hides on the other side of the walls?"

Dina's voice haunts his mind. Eren forcefully turns his back on the scene and walks out of the house. He is ambushed by the gray sky and the thick smoke in the air. He coughs a little, While Dina just grins, staring at him in the middle of the street.

"Bad, isn't it?" Dina asks.

"Where are we?"

Dina shrugs. "Liberio." she offers. "About a thousand kilometers or something south of Paradise, I mean-- the walls."

Eren looks around. He watches the strangely dressed people go with their daily lives. "There are... People outside the walls?"

"Well yes. But not the same race as us." Dina explains. "Let me tell you, Eren. You and I are Eldian. We can turn into titans and there are other humans who are not Eldians." Dina's eyes follow a man and a child that pass between them. "See their armband? That's mandatory from Eldians outside. Where we're from."

She doesn't wait for the information to settle in Eren's mind. She keeps walking south. With no other options, Eren stumbles after Dina.

"And this..." Dina says as he stops in front of giant brick walls with fences on top and a soldier guarding it. "Is what waits for you outside..."

Eren looks around, he sees some sort of exit where people formed a very long line, showing something to the guards just for going out. "Just... More Walls?" Eren murmurs, shocked.

Dina chuckles. "I wish it was just it. How old are you?" she asks suddenly.

Eren blinks in surprise. "I'm uh... Sixteen." he says.

Dina nods. "Ok then. I don't think showing battle scenes is bad for your psyche." she snaps her finger. Their surroundings change.

The ground under Eren explodes and he falls to the ground. He pushes himself up, shocked at the impact he didn't feel.

Dina chuckles, "relax. It's not real." she says. "Although... It was pretty scary when it was..."

Eren hears a pained gasp coming from his right. He turns his head to see a wounded man with a white uniform and a gun lay dying on the field. Next to him, a woman with a red cross on her Eldian armband kept a bloodied cloth over his abdomen.

"Is that you...?" Eren gasps, stumbling to his feet.

The Dina in the memory, wipes the sweat off of her face. She carries the injured soldier back and falls into a pit, disappearing from their view.

Dina nods emotionlessly. "Yes. I needed the money." she says. "Not exactly proud of helping Marley one bit. But I needed the scraps of

money.` She repeats it. "But then... Everything changed when I met the owl... Or well, the Owl found me." Dina explains.

The scenes shift and they're in an underground class, and Dina is reading a crowd of books.

Dina nods his head towards a man. "Familiar, isn't he?" she whispers.

He indeed is, the man on the front row, who holds a notebook in his hand and is taking notes, is indeed familiar.

"Dad!" Eren shouts. He kneels down and waves in front of him. "Can he see me?"

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because I won't let him." Dina says. She waves her hand and the world spins until they are back at her and his father's supposed home with a blond boy playing with a monkey doll.

Dina walks away, leaving Eren in his shock. She stands up next to the blonde boy, inspecting his actions very carefully. "Eren, Here..." Dina smiles. "Meet your brother... My son... His name is Zeke."

Eren shakes his head violently. "Ok, lady, now you've taken it way too far!" he snaps. "I won't--"

Dina holds up a finger. "You believe your father was from beyond the walls." she adds a second. "That he was married. That I was a titan and now human." she holds up a third finger. "And you believed everything I said..." she pushes her hand in her pockets. "... And somehow having a brother in unbelievable?"

Eren opens his mouth to say something but immediately shuts it.

"Although... He is the one who doomed us... I wouldn't accept him as kin if I were you either..." Dina says, a hint of anger in her voice.

She doesn't wait for Eren to ask questions. She snaps her fingers and memories fast forward until the world is spinning endlessly around them.

Eren feels... Conflicted.

Confused.

Hurt.

And alone just from passing those memories. He wonders what made Dina skip such a large part of her memories now.

The world stops. Eren falls to his knees and grabs his head as tightly as he could. His head throbs painfully and he has to shut his eyes to stop the world from spinning.

"You're missing the best part." Dina laughs. "Don't you wanna know how your father ended up with your mother?"

Eren pushes his scalp harder. "How do I know any of this is even true?" he asks, raising his head.

Dina shrugs. "Well. You're a dead man walking. And I don't gain anything by showing you my own death." she says, her eyes staring at somewhere far, far away.

"DINA!!"

Hearing his father scream Dina's name is strange.

It makes Eren lift his head and see that he's standing over a dam. With marleyan soldiers kicking down people one by one.

Dina is kicked down the walls. Lightning follows and she emerges a bloodied, smiling titan.

"Now, let's switch to the memories you have from your father."

With a snap of her fingers, the world shifts axis. Somehow, the colors around them become darker, the memory fades a little. An obvious indication that the memory belonged to a time more in the past.

He watches with wide eyes as the man turns another patriot into a five meter class and dismisses every other soldier, all to have the pleasure of kicking his father down the wall himself.

Just to get kicked down by his own comrade.

"Oh!" Dina laughs. "So that's why..."

Eren arches an eyebrow. "What!?"

Kruger throws his hat away. "Look at this, Grisha. This is how we of the nine use our powers." Kruger says, slicing the dagger over his palm.

Dina blinks in surprise as Kruger turns into a titan. Eren watches in awe as he destroys the ships and kills every single marleyan he saw.

"Ah! So he wasn't all that bad." Dina whispers. "That explains why your name is Eren."

Eren arches an eyebrow, but the view in front of him is too interesting to take his eyes off. Kruger kills every single soldier, crushes them to death and then casts their dead bodies to the ocean.

Eren suddenly feels her hand on his shoulder. "Observe well, Eren." she says his name with newfound spite. "That is where you got your titan..."

Kruger coughs up blood when he climbs up the stairs and asks Grisha for a conversation. Eren's mind lost its capacity long ago and can't fathom it all at once. The only moment that he opens his eyes,

is when he notices Kruger filling the famous cursed syringe. "When you go inside the walls, make a family."

Grisha looks at his bloodied hands. "Family... But I already have Dina." he pauses. "And Zeke."

"But you need to love someone. Let it be a neighbor or a spouse, love someone. Or this cursed history will happen again." Kruger tells him.

Dina claps sarcastically. "Bravo, Bravo!" she yells, even when no one can hear her.

"Remember why you crossed the walls that day." Kruger tells him. "Remember you must see this mission through. Protect Mikasa and Armin and everyone else."

If this day hadn't been full of one shocking event after another, that would have gotten more of a reaction out of Eren.

"Woo-hoo! Eren, that's quite the shock, don't you think?" Dina laughs. "Alright... I got what I wanted. Now let's rewind. I don't want to hear your parents love story on top of every--."

"Dina..." Grisha suddenly lifts his head and looks around. His eyes slowly focus exactly on Dina standing before it moves. He rubs his head and sighs. "... Now I'm hallucinating."

"Tch." Dina clicks her tongue. She waves her hands and the world spins around again, slower this time. Dina keeps watching the world on a fast track.

Eren shakes his head. "So what are you looking for now?" he asks. "Are you done messing with my mind?"

Dina bites her lips. "Not quite. I need to know how he came across the founding titan too." she rubs her forehead thoughtfully. "To be

totally honest, I was thinking maybe That blond friend of yours with the purple eyes had the founder. But Rod Reiss confirmed it for me."

"Armin!?" Eren shouts. "Did you harm him-- *Did you hurt him ?*"

Eren suddenly grabs her by her forearms and shakes her angrily. "What the hell did you--" he shouts in her face, loudly and angrily.

She breaks his grip and pulls back. "Wow! Hold up. I didn't do anything." she says, rubbing the places where Eren's grip is leaving angry purple bruises on their wake. "Calm down. You're not a person of authority here."

Dina's eyes suddenly widened. "Ah! I know when to go now..." she whispers. Before Eren can shout at her any longer. He finds himself in the dark, right outside of Reiss chapel.

And the father he is more familiar with is opening the entrance.

Dina kneels down. "There you go, Grisha." She cheers. "Patriots waited all their lives for this, huh?"

Grisha stops immediately. He turns around and looks towards Dina. His eyes stare at hers, wide and stunned. Dina tilts her head, a devilish grin on her lips. "Go on..." she murmurs.

Grisha pushes the entrance with a shaking hand and climbs down the stairs.

Dina stands up again, dusting off her clothes.

Eren makes sure to bump into her as he runs inside. "He saw you." he says as a matter of fact, skipping crystal steps as he ran after his father.

Dina falls behind, panting loudly. "Ye-yes..." she takes a deep breath. "... And?"

Eren takes a careful look at the woman again. The only thing he could do was roll his eyes now.

They ran after Grisha until he stood in front of the royal family. Screaming at them about what is happening on the other side of the walls. Eren wants to pay attention to the desperation in his father's voice but Dina suddenly pulls him back. "See that?" she says, pointing at Frieda Reiss' purple eyes...

... And how shockingly similar it was to Armin's.

"See that?" Dina repeats. "That's why I thought your blond was the founder. Can you blame me?"

Eren shuts his eyes. He opens them again and tries to focus on the facts his father was shouting. About how his son and daughter were at risk, how the queen's people were going to be eaten.

And Frieda...

She just took a deep breath and said the most cursed words that Eren had ever heard. How can someone be so casual about their race's mass murder? How can this queen just sit aside and do nothing?

"That is no queen..." Eren forces out between grit teeth.

"That anger in your eyes..." Dina trails off. "I like it."

"Father is going to kill them here." Eren recited from the memory he saw when Historia touched him. "They are all going to die... because the queen refused to fight."

Dina nods. "Sitting aside passively always has more consequences than fighting for what you want." she laughs. "I'm glad we can see this one sequence in the same perspective, Eren."

But his father doesn't fight. The scalpel drops from his hand and he falls to his knees, staring at his own reflection on the crystals. "I'm a

doctor..." he says. "I save lives... Not take any... I can't do this..."

Frieda lowers her hand, looking calmly at the other man.

"I can't do that..." Grisha whispers.

Dina holds a hand up, stopping Eren from moving before he realized he wanted to do something. Instead, she herself moves up to Grisha and sends a threatening glare at Eren, to stay exactly where he is.

Dina slowly kneels down, slowly putting her hands on the crystals to balance herself. Grisha saw her reflection on the crystals before he raised his head, and their eyes met.

Dina smirks, almost forcefully. "Hello there..." she whispers. "Long time no see, stranger."

Grisha's dry lips move without making a sound. "It wasn't a dream..." he whispers silently.

Dina nods. "Not quite..." she shakes her head. "But you see them? That is an actual reality..." she points at the royal family. "Just because you could walk away from the reality in Marley doesn't mean everyone could. Certainly not all the patriots."

The royal family stepped back. Slowly, their sound of cheering the queen to kill the outsider echoes louder than a titans footsteps.

kill him, sister.

kill him before he harms us!

you are the queen, Frieda!

Dina clicks her tongue. "Do you remember... Very very long ago..." She whispers. "When we were still young. And we dreamed of having a child that would come here and steal back the founder?"

Eren feels bad, when he remembers the blond baby in their home.

"Why aren't you doing that right now, Grisha? Feeling sympathetic all of a sudden?" Dina laughs.

Grisha shakes his head.

"I asked a question... Grisha... Stand up. Do what we trained Zeke to do all his life." Dina shouted, she stood up to her feet. "Stand up! Do what we sacrificed everything for!"

Dina shakes her head, Grisha looks away in shame. "you're still silent... I have seen who you really are, Grisha." Dina narrows her eyes. "... And you disgust me."

Eren took a step back in horror.

Dina put a hand on Grisha's shoulder. "Isn't that what we trained Zeke to do all his life? What's making you hesitate?"

Dina tilted her head. "Our comrades? Did they all die for nothing? So you could come up all the way here and back off?" she clicked her tongue. "Are you going to step back and let Marley do all that to Faye again."

And yet, Grisha could not move.

Dina looks at the royal family, who got louder and louder in their shouts.

"Carla, Mikasa and Eren will die." She says as a matter of fact.

Eren arches an eyebrow. He wants to say something but he remembers what Dina said.

Grisha looks up at Dina. "What's... What do you mean?"

Dina looks at him from the corner of her eyes, a small smirk rises to her lips. "I'm in the paths, Grisha. Whatever I hope for happens. Don't you remember?"

"I can't, Dina--"

Dina chuckles. "So you're ok with your family dying? Your new son and wife?" she asks, acting innocent. "Ok, let me make a deal with you. You see your family?" She asks, licking her lips. "They're going to die when the walls fall. If you get the founder, it'll get to my hand and I'll save your new wife, son and daughter with it."

Dina offers a hand to the man, she looks down at Grisha angrily. "Do we have a deal?" she asks "bring me the founder... And I will restore Eldia. So go on... Save your new family the way you couldn't save us."

That was the last thread.

Grisha grabs the scalpel and sinks it into his hand.

Grisha struggles to even walk.

He can barely stand up on his own two feet, the fog in his mind too heavy to bear.

"Dina.. Are you happy now?"

Grisha has to stop, lest he will fall to the ground.

He shouts. "I KILLED CHILDREN! Little children... I crushed them with my hands"

He throws his hands in the air, spinning aimlessly around.

"HOW IS THAT GOING TO SAVE ELDIA!?"

He loses his will to stand eventually. He falls to his knees and stares at his blood stained hands again. "You are purposely keeping Eren away from me, aren't you?" Grisha asks no one.

A few feet back, Eren keeps staring at Dina's face.

It remains completely stoic.

After Grisha's pleading, ever so Slowly, her lips pull into a hideous smirk. "So what if I am?" she says.

Grisha turns around towards her voice. His eyes break.

And Eren's blood runs cold.

This woman... This woman is the manifestation of the devil itself!

How could she?

How could she?

Dina tilts her head and looks at Eren, something flashes over her eyes that Eren is utterly terrified of. "What do you say, Eren?" she laughs. "Anything you have to say to daddy dearest?"

Eren opens his mouth to say something but Dina beats him to it. She waves her hand and suddenly, Eren feels solid and heavy.

And then...

"Eren...?"

His name...

His name is spoken so... Softly.

Before Eren can recognise it, he's being crushed in a hug. His father's arms wrap around him very tightly and he buries his face in his hair. "Oh you've grown... Dear you'd grown so much..."

Eren returns the hug without thinking.

Grisha pulls back, he takes Eren's face into his hands, checking for any injuries. "Are you ok?" he asks. "Is Carla? Mikasa? Are you all alright?"

Eren finds himself nodding.

"Thank the walls, *Thank the walls* ." Grisha crushes him in another hug.

Eren's eyes meet Dina's for just a moment.

She looks almost... Sad while watching them.

"Be careful, Eren." Grisha's voice almost begs him. "It used to be a good thing but... Dina is the most dangerous woman you will ever come across."

Grisha tenses and Eren feels it in their hug.

"Be careful in this path, Eren..." Grisha pleads. "I love you son, I'm sorry I have to give you this titan."

Eren's voice breaks. "But dad, I'm sorry for--"

"Don't ever blame yourself for this... I'm sorry for turning you into the attack titan. I need to beg for your forgiveness but I- I need to go..."

Grisha shakes his head. "I need to go find your real selves now," he says. "I love you, son, take care. I've already seen it-- we'll see each other again." he says. "Take Care... Eren..."

"Grisha!"

Carla's happy cry gets Eren's attention. They embrace each other, clinging to each other's bodies.

His mother whispers prayers and thanks Eren can't quite hear, but anyone would. All of your family surviving a titan attack is as rare as it can get.

Eren and Mikasa's younger selves appear. They see Carla and Grisha in the doorway. Not that Grisha was ever distant or ignorant.

However, he was never the kind to express his feelings through touch. So younger Eren and Mikasa were surprised when Grisha let go of Carla to run to them and hug the two of them like his life depended on it. Carla kneels down. She wraps her arms around Eren and Mikasa. She starts to hush Mikasa gently, when she starts to shake.

"Carla, Eren! Mikasa!" Grisha whispers, holding all of them in his arms. He kisses his wife and lets his children hold on to him for as long as they want.

"Thank you! Thank you Dina!" slip from his fathers lips.

Eren wants to slap himself. Because why would his father thank a random person that day?

Eren looks at Dina from the corner of his eyes.

Dina hums thoughtly. "No need to thank me, Grisha." Dina mumbles. "At least you did them right this time..."

Dina turns around.

She walks away.

Rage boils in Eren's blood as he follows her. "hey, you can't leave it like this!" Eren yells.

Dina doesn't stop. "I can and I will." she says. "This is the past Eren, we can see it clearly but changing it is still pretty useless effort."

Eren can see his father taking his younger selves hand, letting him follow him out to the woods. His blood goes cold. "I'm going to eat dad here!" he yells. "Do something! stop it!"

"I can not." Dina says. "Every small change can ripple into a disaster. Besides, I can't change something as obvious as this. How are we going to stand here if you never acquire the titans?"

"Get back here!"

"You make a lot of awfully rude demands for someone who is about to die." Dina shouts. "My work is over with you."

The world falls. Everything fades into a dark sky, sand appears under his feet and a glowing tree behind Dina. "Did you forget?" she laughs. "I will eat you now and complete the mission."

And soon, even the paths crumble to dust.

Historia tries to escape the titan but the giant keeps her iron tight.

Dina lets go of Eren and he immediately falls, as if he's knocked out. Dina doesn't waste a moment. Lightning dances over her skin and explodes into steam of a titan shifter.

Historia covers her face from the explosion.

Eren rises his head just on time to see a skinless titan's mouth wrapping around his body.

Time slows down, Wires connect in the back of Eren's mind. Memories flood in his eyes but he can only seem to keep one fragment.

He's next to the ocean again.

His feet are soaked, and so is his shirt. His hand is too, but the warmth of others' fingers laced with his own keeps him warm.

Eren looks at his right, Armin stares out at the view. A little older, A little wiser, but with the same spark of excitement and... Fear?

"I can't believe this..." Armin whispers, he lets go of Eren's hand to hug himself tightly. "The sun is setting. The sun is setting. It's the third day of fall. 854. Third day of fall, 854."

Eren reaches for the blond, he pulls him into a hug and rests his head over his chest, letting the other to lean against him. "Armin, calm down. It's going to be ok."

Armin's hands latch into his body, grips his coat and buries his face into his chest. "It's not." His voice has a calmness that his body doesn't. "It won't. It's the third day of fall and I..."

Armin freezes in his arms.

Then, his hands pull harder at Eren's much larger body. "Eren, I don't want to go." Armin whispers, his fingers clutch to the back of Eren's shirt.

"You won't." Eren whispers in his hair. "You won't. You'll stay alive. And you'll live very very long. And when you die, you'll have a thousand wrinkles on your face and your hands will be shaking from old age."

Armin's lips quiver. "Eren..."

He pulls back, now, there is a bitter smile over his face.

"This is not something you can fight."

Eren doesn't have time to wonder what happens next.

Citizens of Trost have to leave their daily lives when two explosions echo from behind the wall.

The walls shake until a monkey, a beast, is standing on top of the walls, two stones in hand.

The next moment, The armored titan barrels through the city once again.

The beast titan sits comfortably on top of the walls, "Bring him to me." he says, holding his hands open "While you can."

Eren: so when are you actually explains things with details?

Dina: that's the neat part, I won't.

No matter how much you measure, you'll always b...

Chapter 17: No matter how much you measure, you'll always be my little boy

Fanfic writing is my way of emptying stress and when I'm stressed characters die. Last night I wrote a new fanfic and the next morning I scrapped it all because not even demons are that cruel lol.

I want to take a moment to thank everyone reading this. Kudosing and commenting because that is what is getting me through life!

So I was thinking. I never gave much thought to Dina/Carla ships but it looks actually pretty promising here. So what do you guys think?

WARNING

WARNING

typical canon violence and death.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

An hour before:

Trost...

The most southern city currently in the hands of humanity and the forefront of their defenses.

Erwin stares at the giant walls, from here in his office, he can't see the damages done by the armored titan in its precious attack. And Erwin isn't naive enough to think his next attack is going to be less damaging or far away.

And now that there is a military role in place and the fake king was dethroned. Now, comes the issue of replacing him.

Erwin hums thoughtfully.

His doors are knocked and he allows them entry, to his surprise, it's Jean.

His apprentice walks in and salutes half-heartedly. "You requested my presence."

"I thought you were with the Hange squad."

"The messenger came before they headed off," he says simply. "Other than Armin, everyone else went to check on the equipment and the thunder spears."

Erwin sits behind his table, Jean crosses his arms behind his back politely "So, I want to hear your thoughts on this." Erwin says.

Jean fists his hands on his back. "I never thought you'd ask me this question when we're inside the walls..." he murmurs incoherently. But he shakes his head anyway and meets the commander's eyes. "Well, the military role isn't certainly the best and the people won't comply with it for long. My best guess is that..." Jean's eyes fell on the papers. "You have a substitute in mind... And it has something to do with Dina Yeager."

Erwin laces his fingers in front of himself, a knowing smirk appears. "It appears your observation skills are better than I thought."

"In the past three months... In and out of the field... You've been training me, sir, it would be strange if it wasn't." Jean remarks. "And

once, you accidentally referred to Miss Dina as 'Fritz' when you were semi-unconscious when the doctors came... It was obvious after that."

Erwin hums thoughtfully. "Interesting." he says. "So I can trust you. You need to do something for me?"

Jean blinks in surprise.

"I need to find evidence that proves a claim right or wrong. I can trust you to find the details of yourself."

"What... Claim...?"

"Dina and Historia..." Erwin explains. "And their connection to royal blood or the true royals of the walls. The council has already confessed but I'm going to need solid proof. Can I trust you with that?"

Jean looks stunned. He stands up to his feet, his eyes unknowingly look on the ground instead of the commander. "I... I will try..."

He immediately regrets it.

"Ah, Levi!"

Erwin rushes to welcome Levi into his office, slowly closing the door behind him. "Welcome! I didn't think you'd come so soon." he says, almost too happily.

Levi clicks his tongue, his narrowed dark eyes take Erwin's action under surveillance as he runs around the room and plays with the pot and kettle.

"It's your recipe!" he says, almost in a sing-song tone.

And that is what sparks suspicion in Levi's mind.

A few moments later, Erwin brings two tea cups, the smell of it already dancing on Levi's nose and yet...

"I know that look in your eyes." Levi says, a hint of confusion in his tone. Rare as they are, Erwin's smiles make him more surprised than happy. But this time...

Erwin sits in front of him. "I was hoping you would come here." Erwin whispers, a hidden cheerfulness that most would miss makes Levi arch an eyebrow.

Erwin pushes the cup closer to Levi's side. "Would you have some tea, as a celebration?"

"Celebrations?"

Sure, they just changed the government and overthrew the fake king. However, Levi never knew Erwin despised the king let alone had so much that he would celebrate for his demise.

Levi doesn't say a word, he instead decides to take a small sip from the cup. It's just as he expected it, rich in smell and taste.

"It could use more time on the--"

The office shakes.

The earthquake is quickly followed by the sudden screams of the people around him, mixed together until none of the screams hold a meaning.

Erwin and Levi exchange a look. They rush outside of the office and into the crowded open area.

Erwin looks up at the walls, and what he sees doesn't surprise him.

"Bring him to me." the beast titan says immediately, his giant narrow hands swing in the air.

"BEGIN EVACUATION PROCESS!" Erwin yells before a second lightning erupts in the area.

The closed gate of Trost shatters as the armored titan barrels through.

"Now we're following a maid, now?"

Olou asks his other squadmates as they take shelter in between the trees. There is no way Dina can see them in the dark of the night and between the branches of those giant trees near Reiss chapel.

"Yes." Eld says, narrowing her eyes at Dina who walks up to the guards near Reiss chapel while completely ignoring them. "Although a maid wouldn't simply--"

Eld doesn't get to finish his sentence. Dina shouts as loudly as she can. The guards immediately fall to their knees. Two yellow lightning makes it so that the night turns to the day.

Petra covers her eyes from the light, the next moment, two titans rise to their feet.

"Did she just-- did she just turn them into bloody titans!?!?" Olou yells.

Petra hits the back of his head and covers his half scream with her hand. "Shut it!! Don't get her attention."

Elder's hands tremble. "This is bad..." he whispers. "If she... If she can turn any human into titan with her voice then--" Eld slowly turns around and meets the others faces. "What's stopping her from turning us all into one?"

"Snap out of it, Eld. We were here. We weren't affected." Petra reasons, she pulls her hoodie back to see the view of titans marching after Dina more clearly. "Maybe she can't have that control over every single person."

Dina looks up at the titans. "Keep people out, Please." she says, then nonchalantly opens the door to walk in.

Eld holds his two squadmates back, quietly inspecting the two titans. "They look... Frozen." He whispers.

"Two ten meter class." Petra whispers, she draws her blades up. "We can sneak up behind the chapel and slice their napes up."

Olou clicks his tongue. "Why aren't they moving?" he asks. "There's a whole village near here. They can smell it. There's no way--"

Petras eyes widened. "The beast titan!" she recalls. "Is it possible she has the same powers as him? Are the titans obeying her?"

Eld rubs his chin. "I don't know. We need to report this ba--"

A loud, echoing sound of sirens echoes around them. The sheer volume coming from the south is alarming. The bells ring nonstop and all three of them know what it means.

The walls have fallen.

"That sound..."

Eld swings his blade. "We need to get back to Trost! The walls have probably fallen!" he yells. "Change of plans! We can't wait any longer!"

Eld jumps down the tree. "We're going to need Eren in this war. Let's get inside."

A hammer hits his head repeatedly and Eren can't help but endure the headache that this metaphorical hammer causes.

The first thing he feels is a sharp, painful and intentional punch to his face.

"Get up, you coward!"

Stunned, Eren lifts a hand to his face, his skin is throbbing and blood drips down his nose.

"Get up and fight! You're just gonna stand there and let Dina eat you?"

Eren's eyes register the white sand under his hands, the glowing tree he can see from the corner of his eyes. *The Paths*. A silent voice whispers in the back of his head.

He lifts his head just enough to see the horizon and is met with a bloodied, disfigured body of Armin's.

And another punch to the face.

"Get up-" Someone yells again, someone with an aching familiar that he can't quite recognise. "- and *fight* !"

Eren's eyes meet his own.

"Fight!" his own mirror image shouts at him.

Although there are wrongs with his face. His hair is longer, his jaw more defined, his eyes more tired than he'd ever been.

"Fight!"

The scream that tears itself from his throat is inhumane.

"**Get away from me!**" he shouts at Dina, and surprisingly, her titan obeys.

Eren lifts his head, his eyes a burning purple. "You can't eat me without touching me. Without giving me the power above yours." Eren spits angrily. "... As long as we're not in the paths!"

For the first time, Eren has the time to thoroughly inspect Dina's new female titan. It's skinless and Eren can clearly see the muscles underneath. The notable differences between hers and Annie's is that the face looks older, the eyes more hooded and Dina has visible dark red veins underneath her muscles.

Dina looks at her titan hands. **"You are wrong."**

Her voice somehow beats the beast titans in terms of *knocking Eren's breath out* .

"you have no clue what this power entails, therefore, can not use it properly and besides... If we ever step foot in paths, Ymir will only obey me." Dina says as a matter of fact.

"I know shit about that but--"

Eren grinds his teeth. **"Stay away!"** he demands. He manages to keep Dina away for maybe a minute before she manages to take another step in Eren's direction.

"The titan!" Historia suddenly yells. "Don't kill it! It's Dina!"

Eren's eyes widened.

Simultaneously, two hooded figures zip past Dina Yeager's jaw and slice her mouth open. Her jaw falls, the sensation makes Dina snap her head away.

Eren's eyes a blur of green that falls into her nape and slices the skin away. Then Eren sees Petra and Oluo cut the veins holding Dina to her titan.

"I'm sorry but... We can't let that happen." Petra says as she swings her blade.

All three of them pull back towards the crystal caves walls with their ODM, Eld pulls Dina with him before slowly falling to the ground.

The titan holding Historia and Kenny falls to the ground. Historia pulls herself out unharmed.

Eld nods at Petra and Olou. "Olou, get him out. We can't waste time." he orders, they both nod. Olou finds the keys to Eren's chain fallen next to his body as he climbs up the stairs.

He takes Eren's hand and pushes in the key. "You put up a good fight, kid." he says. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news but we really need you back in the game."

Eren blinks in surprise. "Did-Did something happen?"

"We need to go back, Trost is under attack and we really need the titan there." Petra points her blade at Eren from the ground. "And for goodness sake, put a shirt on."

Olou breaks the chains around Eren's body one by one, until the boy is good enough to stand up again. He stands up and his feet feel dry and aching from kneeling like that for so long.

Olou throws his hoodie at Eren, he accepts it and pulls it around himself.

"What should be done with him?" Eld asks, standing above Kenny Ackermans unconscious body. "He doesn't look good."

"We're in a hurry." Petra reminds him.

Eld nods in agreement. "Then we should come back for him later." he hums. "We can't leave her though." He picks up the woman's bridal style and walks back to the exit. He offers Dina to Olou and stares at Historia and Eren. "The gates of Trost have been breached." he repeats. "We all are going to be needed in the battle."

Historia and Eren exchange a silent look. They both look at Eld with a tired but serious look. Petra and Eld rush out of the chapel and they follow them without question.

They head to the stables and luckily find more than enough horses to evacuate towards Trost, and of course a wagon to bring Dina with.

Petra points a horse for each of them and they start preparing it. Time passes in a haze until Petra and Eld are running out of the stable and Eren and Historia fall behind.

It takes a few minutes to catch up to the two veterans. "Where's Dina?" Eren asks just as Petra snaps the reign of the horses and rushes off faster.

Historia and Eren exchange a look, Historia takes off and Eren follows.

Only once they catch up to her again does she answer their question. "With Olou. Passed out on a wagon." Petra says, pointing his thumb at their back. "I think it was her first time being a titan. Woman knocked herself out pretty fast."

Historia looks back, at the carriage that was moving significantly slower than them. "Don't worry. Olou's with her." Eld says as a matter of fact. "They'll be coming a little slower."

"What happened?" Historia asks curiously. "Where's Ymir?"

"... And Armin, Mikasa and the rest of the scouts." Eren asks. "I thought--"

"What? That everyone would come for your rescue?" Petra chuckles. "People were busy with that uprising going on."

"Uprising?"

"Long story short..." Eld clears his throat to get the others' attention. "There was a coup when you were out..."

~~

Eren had a hard time believing what he heard but when they reached the gates of Trost and saw the people rushing outside, he was convinced.

He jumps from his horse and raises his hand to bite on. With no ODM, his best chance at getting to the battle was with his titan.

Mom is here!

We need to hurry!

"No! You can't run ahead into battle!" Petra yells, pulling Eren back by his shoulder. He clenches his jaw, wishing she wouldn't appear out of nowhere like that. "We need to get to commander Erwin!"

Eld narrows his eyes at the town. "Olou!" he shouts. "We'll find commander and captain Levi. You keep an eye on Dina. If the beast titan is after our titan shifters-- there's a good chance she'll need protecting."

"Perfect, bloody perfect." Olou says with a nod.

"We still have no clue what's on the other side." Eld reminds them. "We need to get Historia an ODM and get out orders. Is that clear?" Eld says, with a clear intention towards Eren.

Eren slowly drops his hand.

The Garrisons are trying their hardest to battle the titans storming inside the city.

Erwin watches it from over one of the highest rooftops in the city, with the very few soldiers he had in the area in his command. While the garrisons are trying their hardest to save the lives of innocent civilians, the scouts need to take out the armored and the Beast titan, who sat above the walls and watched what happened closely.

He turned to all the people who could gather on fast notice. The crowd is small. The most noticeable absence being Levi's squad and Eren.

"We need to take down the titan shifters. They can turn the tides in this war with a blink of an eye." he says. "As long as they are standing there, there will be no end to the bloodbath in Trost."

A zipping sound assaults the small peace and then Petra and Eld land on the same rooftop, each carrying Historia and Eren.

"Commander Erwin, Captain Levi." Eld says loudly, both him and Petra salute. "We're here. Eren and Historia are saved and unharmed."

Eren and Historia salute too. Erwin nods at them. "Change of plans, then." he says. "Eren, you'll have to battle the armor long enough that the thunder spears can arrive and we can use it. Hange-?"

"We'll need time." they say as a matter of fact. "Most of our resources were compromised by the military police and currently outside of Trost."

Erwin nods emotionlessly. He turns to the Ymir and Levi squad. "We don't know what the Beast titan has up his sleeve, so the rest of us will keep the pure titans away from Eren and the armored's battle and keep the beast distracted. Ymir, you'll be the fake attack to stop him from doing any tricks while Levi, you're going to be the true person waiting to take down the beast."

Armin bites his lip. "I think he wants to throw something. Probably rocks." he recalls.

"Why do you say that?" Petra asks, looking at him and then the beast titan sitting calmly up at the walls.

Erwin narrows his eyes. "That is a good guess. But not something we can count on."

"It's not so out of line..." Jean whispers. "Look, there are boulders next to him over the walls. He probably wants to do something with them."

"Then we'll have to take caution. However, we will need to be in his line of vision for the distraction to work.."

Erwin takes a deep calming breath.

"Alright-- scatter!"

The scouts obey him.

Eren, Mikasa and Armin exchange a look, then Mikasa follows Ymir's titan towards the other end of the walls.

"Let's go." Armin murmurs. "Petra and Eld are already on their way to the storage rooms."

Eren nods. "We have to walk, though, I don't have an ODM."

"I know. You need to transform somewhere Reiner can see you."

Armin nods. He pulls Eren's hand to walk after himself. His hold feels exceptionally warmer as they run in between the streets.

They suddenly stop and Armin looks around the corner, his eyes meet the beast titan and the armored face. He closes his eyes over the sudden sound of titans running in the area. "Here's good enough..."

Eren takes a deep breath. "Alright..." he whispers. "Wish me luck--"

"Eren!" Armin pulls him back into the alleyway. He looks down. Eren can't quite grasp his emotions because his bangs cover his eyes. His hold on Eren's shoulder becomes protectively tighter. "Armin?"

"Thanks for coming back..." he whispers. "I'll... I'll be close with your battle with Reiner and... Don't worry, Carla and my grandpa have probably already evacuated."

Eren nods.

He puts his hand over Armin's and squeezes his hand three times.

Then, he's ready to let go.

Armin flies away from the battle with his ODM gear.

Eren transforms into his titan, his roar fills the city. Armin's eyes follow up the wall just in time to see Reiner jump down and run towards Eren with a roar of his own.

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line.

I have just one role...

Armin fists his hands on his side. "To get Eren out if things go south." he says out loud.

The air stills around him, then speeds up and something pierces through his body. Armin gasps loudly before his body starts to scream. He loses his balance and falls off of the roof.

a rock.. .

Armin just has enough time to look at the giant hole in his stomach, his eyes look up at Zeke before they roll up and his mind gives up.

these paradoxes drive me insane.

Zeke thinks as he crushes the first round of rocks in his hands.

if that Arlert fellow truly is the founder or a shifter, then this will be nothing for him.

He aims and throws.

The world comes around him in bits and pieces.

For a moment, Armin doesn't recognise the soft, but cold, white sand under his fingertips. Half of his face is pressed to it, and Armin can see a glowing tree in the distance.

Somewhere...

"You really can't stay out of trouble, can you?"

The voice comes from the end of a tunnel. Followed by a deep buzzing sound that makes Armin flinch and his hands fist angrily on the sand.

"Where..." he gasps, then it settles.

The owner of the voice pulls him to his back and shows his face in his vision. "Hush..." he cups Armin's face with one hand, his thumb running over his skin in a small soothing motion.

Eren of the paths.

And if he's here it means...

Armin sits up, he gasps a deep breath and presses his hand to his side, where the biggest numbness was coming from. "I died..." Armin says as a matter of fact. He stares at his own hands. "I died and I--"

Eren sits next to him, cross legged and leaning his head against his fist. "You know..." he whispers. "Every time you come here I curse your Eren a little more."

Armin massages his temples, trying to get his mind to function again. "It wasn't his fault."

His stomach turns suddenly, he grabs it and bends over it, cursing the white hot pain flashing through his body.

"It's temporary." Eren of the paths tells him. "Though... Probably lasts for a day or so."

Armin swallows hard, nothing can stop his body from turning. "Take me back."

"I can't." Eren says honestly. "If you turn up alive. Zeke will be more determined to get you. You're an unknown variable to him."

Eren crosses his arms over his chest.

"I can't let you go back," he says. "Not now. Not until Jean finds you."

"Jean? Why Je--"

Armin's eyes widened.

He jumps to his trembling feet and tries to stand up but falls to his knees, his limbs still too weak to hold him upright. "Everyone!" he yells. "What-- what happened did Zeke- did Zeke's attacks--"

"They're ok." Eren assures him. "They're with Hange pulling out thunder spears, remember?"

Armin looks up, his purple eyes suddenly filled with hope. "And Jean?"

Eren nods. "He'll... Tell you yourself." he clears his throat. "But for now, we'll have to wait until he finds you and hides you until I can let you wake up. If you wake up in Zeke's range of vision..."

Eren shakes his head.

"He's a bastard. You know how he is." he sighs.

Suddenly, Eren's eyes widened with an alarm. "Oh. Well..." he slowly closes his eyes. "Times up. Jean found you."

Eren snaps his fingers before Armin can protest and press him for more questions.

One moment, the beast titan was sitting and inspecting the fight rather lazily, and the next, rocks are flying towards them.

Erwin has many soldiers fighting the pure titans in the open like this. He himself and ten others are on a roof, the best place for pure titans but worst for the flying rocks rushing towards them.

we don't have time--

Erwin's eyes snap to his left. There are three pure titans running towards their roof, completely oblivious to the deadly rocks flying towards them.

the titans...

Erwin thinks vaguely.

the rocks he'll throw will most likely kill the titans. The flesh of dead titans and the steam will provide more than enough cover to ensure one person's survival from the rocks.

Erwin sees the beast titan lifting his hand and his soldiers scattering all to the wrong places, there's no point in shouting it, the rocks will kill them before they have the chance to obey Erwin's command.

I can't die here...

Erwin looks at the crowd of titans coming their way.

I can not die here. Not until I know the truth .

He clenches his jaw.

Dina better have a good explanation. He won't die. Not when he's so close to the truth--

And then his eyes meet with Jeans, who stares frozen at the beast titan.

Erwins eyes soften immediately.

Time slows down.

The beast titan throws the rock a roar. It speeds up, making Erwins choice much easier for him.

Erwin pushes Jean off of the roof and in between the upcoming crowd of titans.

Jean's eyes widen as he falls, he meets Erwins eyes, Jean can see Erwin's face pull up to a smile for the first time in his life. Not the smile of a manipulator but one of genuine happiness.

Jean falls on his back on the ground behind the house. While Commander Erwin is still on the roof.

Jean doesn't have enough to scream the commander's name as the rocks flew past him. He doesn't see it.

But he feels the rocks pierce the titans around him. The titans give out a last roar.

Their steaming bodies fall on Jean, covering him from the beast titans view.

Dina opens her eyes because the voice of distraught people is like nails to her scalp. She opens her eyes, massaging them angrily while her mind catches up with what happened.

He doesn't need to wonder what because he hears an unfamiliar *swish* in the air. She focuses her blurry vision on the man in front of her and the swords he's wielding. "Don't even think about it." the

soldier says. Dina has enough mind to notice the scout logo and the man's name, Olou, written underneath it.

"Think about what?" She asks, she sits up and stares at the soldier but gets no answer.

Then, two roars of titans fill in the air.

She jumps to her feet immediately. "What happened?" she yells. "Marleys here already?"

"I don't know about Marley, ma'am, but the beast and armored titan are." Olou tells her and immediately regrets it.

Dina looks up at the walls, she makes up her mind quickly. "There is one way this'll finish fast." Dina tells him. "Get me up at that wall."

"Are you crazy, lady?"

"Are you?" Dina retaliates. "You either take me or I transform, your choice."

Olou doesn't answer but when Dina hits her hand against the wagon hard enough to break the woods and her skin, Olou stills. She raises her hand, and shows the blood oozing out of it. "So?" she asks.

With no other choice. Olou picks her up bridal style and rushes to the top of the wall. Dina has to shut her eyes and cling to Olou for her life. Even when they land on the wall, Dina doesn't open her eyes.

"We're here." Olou says and nonchalantly drops Dina. The death grip she had on him makes both of them fall on the surface of the wall.

Dina quickly stands up to her feet again. "Gratitude." she says. A nervous smile forms on her lips. "This place is too high and oh... *Beast and armor .*"

Dina shakes her head, she watches the titan she assumes is Eren's battle the armored titan. She watches his movements closely. That is

certainly a trained fighter.

And then...

"Why aren't those pure titans attacking?" she asks out loud.

"They're probably being controlled by the beast titan." Olou says, not bothering to stand up. "He does that."

Dina's voice gradually gets quieter and quieter. "That's impossible. I was the last member of the royal blood in Mar-"

She stops.

Her gray eyes widen and she stares at the beast titan who crushed a boulder in his hands.

And then he throws.

"Zeke..." she whispers, even when people under the walls scream and die by his rocks. "Zeke loved... He loved...."

She covers the genuine smile on her face from excitement. "ZEKE!" she shouts. "That's my son! That's my boy, Zeke!"

"Woman! Are you crazy?" Olou yells. "That beast can't be anyone's son."

That is the last straw Dina can hold. She walks to the edge of the wall, she looks down but the height makes her stomach turn. She shuts her eyes and takes another step into the void.

The air gives away and Dina falls to the ground. He looks back Olou jumps after her and catches her mid air. "Crazy woman!" he shouts right before they hit the ground. His ODM lowered the impact but still, her sides and back hurt from falling to the ground and rolling into an alleyway.

"Are you crazy!" Olou yells. "The monkeys gathered another shot! He can kill us any moment!"

"I'm his mother! He won't shoot!" she yells back.

"He doesn't know that--"

The air pierces her skin, the houses around them, and the very air they breathe. Dina can see several stones moving at an incredible speed from the corner of her eyes.

And then-- the building behind them crumbles above their heads.

The next moment Dina opens her eyes, she's on the ground.

The world spins around her, the screams and yells come from the end of a tunnel. She can't feel the tip of her fingers or the lower half of her body.

A drop of blood rolls down her face and into the pool on the ground.

She gasps, the titan healing is already working its magic. The headache alone could have killed her if steam wasn't rising from her head.

Her gray eyes move up, she can see the beast titan over the wall, already crushing another boulder.

"Zeke..."

It feels like a click was reset. She suddenly feels the lower half of her body again, so she sits back up. Dina looks back at the debris, her breath catches in her throat.

She immediately knelt down. "Olou...?" she whispers, her eyes staring at what little of the bloodied body she could see. Only the left half of his face and shoulders. The rest were caught under the rubble. From the blood rushing down his shoulders, there isn't any time left for the soldier.

Dina shuts her eyes. "I'm sorry..." she whispers. "I'm sure Zeke... Zeke has a reason for this." *he must have!*

Dina puts her hand over Olous lifeless eyes and closes them. She stands up to her feet, she holds her injured left elbow tightly as she walks behind another, still intact wall.

"Zeke..." she whispers, staring up at the beast titan, as the giant crushed another boulder in his hands. This time, he aims it at the jaw titan rushing towards him over the walls.

"What happened to you..."

I can't get to him like this...

from this far... He won't recognise me.

She turns her head to her left, a titan has fallen to the ground and the armor is standing right above it.

That must be Eren's titan...

Dina narrows her eyes as a plan forms in her mind.

Ymir transforms on top of the walls.

Even that isn't enough to catch the beast titan off guard.

Mikasa is her back up, but she can't help but stop when she spots her mother near the gates of Trost, with commandant Shadis and Mr Arlert. If she hadn't seen a swarm of titans rushing towards them, she could have ignored it.

Mikasa gets out of her way, he lands on the ground and rushes to the crowd. Three titans, and no soldiers left alive in the area. She takes off again and slices the first titans neck, before stabbing the second in his eyes and killing the third one who got suspiciously

close to the crowd. She kills the second last, and lands to the ground.

"Mother! Is everyone ok?" she asks, rushing to Carla's side.

From the looks of her apron, she was probably in the middle of cooking when the sirens went off. She nods. "Yeah," she says.

"The evacuation should finish now..." Commandant Shadis says. It can be translated to *go back to your duty*.

As if on autopilot, she nods. She turns around to go back, just to witness Eren's titan being hit to the ground, and Reiner punching it repeatedly.

"Oh no... Eren..."

Carla arches an eyebrow. "What is it? What's wrong?" she asks. "Mikasa is everything--"

"I need to go, Eren needs backup." she snaps, "get out of the city, mother, NOW!"

Carla watches her take off towards the fallen titan fighting the armored. The armored titan picks it up and throws it across the street, dangerously close to where they were.

Carla raises her head. *where's Eren?* She asks herself. *Mikasa says he needs back up so why--*

Carla's eyes widened.

Why is she protecting that titan?

"Come on, YMIR!" Mikasa yells. "Diverge his attention... I can't do anything like this."

Mikasa curses under her breath. And Carla can't hear it from this distance. She covers her mouth in shock.

Why did Mikasa say she needs to back Eren up and then go towards the titan?

Carla stares at the armored titan, its steps echoing all around the city.

"Get up! Eren!" Mikasa yells from a nearby roof. "Our resources haven't arrived yet!"

Eren...

She blinks in surprise.

Why is Mikasa... Calling that titan Eren?

Carla stares at the two titans, fearing their clash.

is that... Eren...

Mikasa yells something, about Ymir needing backup and Levi squads action. Over the walls.

This only solidifies her guess.

"Is that... Eren?" she asks out loud. Quiet enough that only Keith could hear her.

Keith visibly flinches. That makes Carla freeze. Stunned, she turns to Keith with an angry frown.

"Keith-" She yells. "Do you know something!?"

Keith turns his head. "I... Don't know." he says. "But considering how much Eren was under suspicion and arrested I..."

Keith meets Carla's eyes and her calm shatters.

"It's not unlikely."

In the deafening silence of the city, even the simplest sounds can echo, all can hear.

No one knows why the armored titan stops.

A small stone hits his face. It's unnoticable and he doesn't even flinch. But the tiny "clank" sound echoes in the streets.

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!"

And then, a woman is standing in front of Eren's passed out titan. Carla. She holds her hands up protectively, standing right in front of Eren's titan and between him and the armored.

Keith jumps after her. "Carla!"

Carla doesn't stop. He takes another stone from the ground and hits the armored titan with it.

"GET AWAY FROM MY SON!"

Carla rushes to Eren's side. She stands in front of The titans face and spreads her hand, covering the titans face from the armored titan as much as her mortal body would allow.

"Get away!" she yells again. "And Leave us alone!"

The attack titans slit eyes turn round.

He pulls his body up but falls to the ground again, raising dust. All while the armored titan is frozen in front of the mother and child.

Carla doesn't move. She turns her head around just to see the disfigured titan from the corner of her eyes. "It's ok." she says, she doesn't see a titan, a predator and monster. She sees her son behind the facade of this monster.

She smiles at him.

"I know you, Eren." she says, her eyes start to shine with unshed tears. "No matter how much you measure, you're still my little boy."

The attack titans body stills.

The armored stares at the view.

It's silent for a few seconds.

The armored titan breaks it with loud footsteps. Carla looks at him and shuts her eyes, she notices another lighter gigantic sound coming from behind.

She doesn't move. She stays grounded.

Pitter

Patter

"I won't leave like this. Not when you are so defenseless, I won't abandon my son!"

The sounds suddenly stop.

A beat later, Carla opens her eyes. To her horror, The armored titan is frozen while running, still in a running posture but frozen in time.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size."

Carla snaps her head back, towards the deep but feminine voice coming from behind her. She gasps when he sees a skinless female titan kneeling on the ground, one hand on Eren's shoulder and the other stretched towards the armored titan.

The hand on Eren's shoulder tightens.

And then, the female titan screams.

When Eren lost Mobility of his titan, he assumed it was the end. When his mother appeared, he tried his best to move again, to at least protect her but it happened the other way around.

And then, in a bright flash of light and every memory he has ever seen, Eren wakes up in a white cold desert. Eren looks at the white sand in his closed fist and quickly rises to his feet. "What the--" he doesn't have enough time to yell until he hears another yell, somehow even more mad than he was.

"Bring him here!" Dina yells at a... As a child?

Eren narrows his eyes, to look more carefully at the frail looking girl Dina is yelling at. She grabs the girl by her shoulders. "Bring him here! Bring Zeke here!" Eren arches an eyebrow, but here, he knows he has to watch first.

The girl falls to the ground and makes a sculpture of a human, and nonchalantly walks away. In a split second, the sculpture turns into a figure of a man, somehow in the moment of throwing something.

Dina stares at him and his bearded blond face for a moment. Eren has to admit, they look ridiculously alike. The same hair color, eye color and long forehead. But... But Eren can see his father there too.

He swallows hard. *of course... Dina just probably wanted to see her son.*

An awkward moment of silence passes. The man lowers her hand and Dina falls to her knees in front of the man, who's already sitting on the ground. Zeke is the one who cracks the silence. "This is--" he mumbles, unable to finish his own sentence.

"Zeke..." Dina mumbles, taking the man's face into her hands.

She doesn't say a word and just pushes him into her embrace. "Ah, Zeke! You've grown so much!" she yells, Eren can hear how wet with

unshed tears her voice is getting. "I thought I'd never see you again! Zeke-- you-- you've grown so much--"

Zeke doesn't return the hug. He's frozen solid, his blue eyes don't see anything anymore.

"Mo... Ther?" he whispers.

Dina nods in his shoulder. "Yes, Yes, Zeke, it's me!" she pushes back to see face to face again. "I'm alive! It was a miracle-- I have a titan now!"

Zeke blinks in surprise. "You have a--"

"Zeke..." Dina whispers, she bites her trembling lip and holds her son fiercely close. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry for everything. I shouldn't have put you on my mission. I should have played with you more... Just-- I should have just acted as your mother and not-- not your superior."

Zeke's eyes widened. "Mother--"

"I understand why you told on us." she says, swallowing the lump in her throat. "And I ask for your forgiveness. I should have never put you in such a position to choose like that."

Dina's smile spreads to her eyes. "But-- I have made it, look where we are, Zeke! We're in the paths!" She holds her hands and shows him around. "I can make it up to you now! There is no need to live under Marley anymore."

Zeke's eyes look at Dina again. "If we're here then... Are you the female titan that touched-- touched Eren?" he asks, just to make sure.

Dina nods. "And I have them to thank for it." she adds with a laugh. "We can easily abolish the fake king here and get our birthright back. Now! Although, it'll be hard convincing them that you're reliable with all the soldiers you threw rocks at."

Eren's mind blanks immediately.

Although, it'll be hard convincing them that you're reliable with all the soldiers you threw rocks at.

"Oh Maria... What the hell?" Eren eyebrows twitch angrily. "The beast titan was MY BROTHER?"

His yell finally breaks the bubble Zeke and Dina made around each other. Dina sighs loudly. She pulls back and sends a tired glare Eren's way. "Not now, Eren. I'll explain everything to you, *later* ."

Eren's eyes travel from Zeke's to Dina's. "Who says I want to see Any of you later?" he yells. "You-"

"It's true... Eren." Zeke interrupts him, disbelief written all over his face. "You're the one with the founder... Not Arlert?"

"Yeah... How in the world do you know my name?" He snaps. "Duh! I don't even care! I knew you weren't as innocent as you pretended to!" Eren points a threatening finger at Dina. "Your son is killing hundreds!"

"He's killing because He's a warrior of Marley! Something that's purely my fault!" Dina yells back before Zeke can have a chance to defend himself.

Dina ignores Eren then. She takes her son's hand and holds them tightly. "Zeke... Come with me." Dina pleads. "I'm sorry for being harsh on you. Both your father and I... But look." Dina shows around the paths with her open palm again. "We're here! We succeeded!" she says with a smile. "A few more days and we'll be the royals of this island like it's our right."

Zeke doesn't react.

"Zeke... We've won... We're finally safe here." she says, kneeling down to be eye level with his son again. He cups his face, not

minding the sharp sting of his beard on her hands. "We can make a home here..."

Zeke lowers his head. "Is this really you, mother?"

Dina smiles. "Your favorite animal is a monkey. You had this monkey doll your father and I saved up so much to buy because we didn't want you to have the neighbors hand me downs." she said, smiling bitterly at the memory. "Grisha's mom used to make apple pies for you every time you visited or we were at 'practise' and you loved it. And I complained about the sugar intake everytime that--"

"--sugar doesn't mix well with our blood." Zeke and Dina say in unison.

Dina lets out a sigh of relief. "I'm glad you believe me, Zeke." she whispers. "I've missed you so much, son..."

Zeke takes a deep breath. "Do you want me to switch sides and stay in paradise?" he asks one last time.

Dina nods.

"That's very nice..." Then, a vicious smirk appears on Zeke's face. "... That's a very nice offer. I would love to."

Hope lights up in Dina's eyes. "That's-- that's perfect!"

"But I have a condition, mother."

"Anything you ask for!" Dina says, not skipping a beat.

Zeke chuckles. He turns to Founder Ymir in the distance. "Founder Ymir, take the ability to reproduce from the Eldians!" Zeke yells.

Eren immediately jumps. "What!" his eyes widen when the girl actually starts to walk back towards the tree she appeared from. "What the hell!?"

Dina stares at his son in shock.

All the hope and joy slips from her eyes, as if someone washed them by pouring a bucket of ice.

Zeke turns back around to his mother, a careless look in his eyes. "That's my condition." he says as a matter of fact. "And my right to demand, as one of royal blood."

"Don't--" Eren yells but changes his mind. He decides to run after the girl. He runs as fast as he can over the white sand.

But something grabs his feet and he falls to the ground. He wants to stand up again but sees his hands and feet are shackled to the ground. Eren pulls at the shackles around his wrist. Panic slowly rises to his chest. "Don't listen to him!!" Eren yells at the top of his lungs at the girl.

The girl keeps walking towards the glowing tree.

Eren pulls at the chains again, they don't budge. He turns his head at Dina in a last ditch attempt. Letting Ymir do something as silly as what Zeke demanded is just *ridiculous* .

"Dina!!" he yells at the top of his lungs. The woman sits frozen in front of his son.

"That's my condition, mother." Zeke repeats, his blue eyes seem devoid of all the emotions he was showing only a few minutes ago.

Dina closes her eyes, and then slowly lowers her head in a distant nod.

Eren's blood freezes over. "Can't you see he *doesn't care* ." he yells at the top of his lungs.

Dina keeps staring at the ground.

Zeke puts a hand above his heart. "Of course I care." he says, Eren doesn't know if he's mocking sympathy or genuinely is. "Doesn't it look like the perfect game mother? In a hundred years, the titans will all be gone and we'll all leave peacefully."

"That's BULLSHIT and you KNOW it!" Eren shouts back.

"I want to come back to my mother, believe me." Zeke says softly. "And what better way to hold peace with it."

"DINA!!" Eren yells again. "I know you're not that stupid!!"

Dina doesn't raise her head.

Eren can't see her face from her back, but even then, he's sure her bangs are covering her face. A chilling sensation rolls down his body when he realizes Dina isn't going to stop it.

And strangely enough, the girl is still walking to the glowing tree.

FIGHT!

His older self's voice rings through his mind. He doesn't need any more motivation.

Eren pulls. He pulls at his bonds, he pulls and pulls until he's screaming at the pain it causes his wrist. when it dislocates, the pain just makes Eren more determined.

"What are you doing?" Zeke asks, Eren can barely hear him over the sound of his own screams. "You can't break them... You're hurting yourself."

Now Eren wants to break them just to prove him wrong. He pulls his hands one last time, his thumbs break and dislocate but finally, his hands slide free.

Eren falls to the sands, but he immediately pushes himself up.

The sound gets Dina's attention, her head turns just a few degrees a moment to see what Eren's doing.

He runs, runs and runs until he tackles the little founder ymir to the ground. "Not on my watch!!" he yells.

"What is he doing?" Zeke laughs. "Once founder Ymir moves she can not stop--"

"SHUT UP!" Eren yells, trying to keep the founder pinned to the ground. "JUST SHUT UP! If I have to keep going like this I will!"

Eren looks at them from the corner of his eyes. Dina steps back, shocked at the sheer density of hatred in his eyes.

"My name is Dina Fritz, the last member of the royal family left on the continent."

the crowd that looks at her, shocked. Grice's face, when she actually is able to decipher codes they'd spend weeks thinking about.

"We will restore Eldia!"

Grisha's face when he said that. The overbearing relief she felt.

"with this mark, you will be a patriot."

and all that went to nothing, when all of them mindless titans on that cursed place. The hopelessness that paralyzed her. Her promise to Grisha. She had dedicated her entire life to the cause.

"You always put your mission and Eldia above any one... Even Zeke."

A malicious voice whispers in her mind. With its dirty, mocking tone.

"what changed now?"

Dina covers her mouth with her hand, suppressing a gasp.

what am I doing??

what AM I--

"Founder Ymir, Stop." she demands. "I will not be a queen of a futureless country."

Ymir immediately stops struggling under Eren's body. Shocked, both Eren and Zeke turn to Dina, asking a million questions about her change of heart.

Dina takes a deep breath. "You are my future, Zeke." she repeats, slowly opening her eyes and meeting Zeke's gaze. "But... You ask for too much."

"Too much?" Zeke repeats. *"too much?"* Like how asking for a normal childhood was too much?"

"Yes." Dina grinds her teeth together. "Is that what you want to hear? Is that where you're going by manipulating me like this?" She swings her hand in the air. "It's too much-- like how you're using my abilities against me is too much for me to ignore."

Zeke clenches his jaw. "Fine, I don't need your permission for anything mother. Here, our powers are equal." he yells. "Founder Ymir do as I say!"

"No stop!" Dina yells back. "You've forgotten that I pulled you here, and I can banish you." she demands.

Dina looks away, she covers the lower half of her face with her hands. "You will always be my child. But as long as you favor Marley

and the destruction of Eldia, then I can't let you stay here." she whispers. "If you ever change your mind, I will accept you with open arms."

"Don't think I--"

"I can not accept you like this. I can't sit aside like Karl Fritz's family as he destroyed Eldia."

Zeke's eyes soften, almost mockingly. "Are you comparing me to Karl Fritz?"

Dina shuts her eyes and waves her hand, Zeke is immediately banished from the paths, his body becomes a pile of sand and topples to the ground, under Dina's feet.

Founder Ymir is still completely under Eren.

With Zeke gone, Eren lets out an audible sigh. His shoulders release their tension and he rolls off of the poor, still girl.

Eren stands up to his knees, he stares at Dina, whose eyes are glued to the pile of sand where Zeke had been. Eren doesn't want to intrude. From the little memory he has of his father, he knows it must be hard for Dina to banish Zeke away like this.

"He's still out there, you know," Eren says, clearing his throat. "In the beast titan, probably getting ready for another attack."

That's the wrong thing to say, because Dina's body immediately tenses.

"I know..." she says. "I know it... Better than you do."

Eren rubs the back of his neck, wondering what he should say next.

Dina hits the sands off of her dress, her head bow lowly.

Eren lets out a deep breath, his shoulders let go of their tenseness when Zeke doesn't miraculously appear again. "I mean uhm... You know, thank you. Thanks for stopping him." he says.

Dina kneels down, she takes a fistful of Zeke's sand and lets it slide off of her hands. "You're welcome..." she spits angrily.

"And you know about the--"

"We don't need to talk." Dina says, very seriously.

Eren shuts his mouth, more from the shock of her apathy than her words.

Dina runs a hand through her face. "We should just get over this." she whispers. "Your mothers waiting for you..."

"So uhm... What are you going to do?"

"Show off how easy it is to repel the titans with my power." Dina says as a matter of fact.

Eren opens his mouth to ask how, he slowly closes it again.

Dina's right, they don't need to talk.

"Hear me, Eldians inside of the island!" the female titan shouts, her voice angelic and demonic at the same time. "I am Dina Fritz. True Queen of the walls!"

Carla stays clinging to her son's titan. She briefly has time to wonder if Mikasa and Keith are safe.

The female titan turns around. **"My family was the ones who built these walls to protect, I can control them again."** she says.

At that moment, the walls crack. They shatter and their dust makes the sky turn red. Carla gasps, her eyes staring at the raw of colossal

titans that stood from between the walls. She snaps her head towards the armored titan, pure titans had attacked it. The armor was fighting for his life and the beast was nowhere to be seen.

"And I've gotten my power back from those who have stolen it from my family." the female titan shouts again.

The pure titans attack the armored and the beast until a third cart titan appears and then run away together.

Carla decides not to pay attention to the chaos around her, instead clings to Eren's titan instead, fearing if she turns her head, her son won't be here any more.

The earthquakes lasted for a full minute. Until they suddenly stop. The colossal titans disappear into thick crystal walls around Trost again. That's when Carla dares to look around, and her ears pick on the sudden shouts of the people and soldiers around her.

And most importantly, the female titan that is turning to dust. Carla's eyes look at Eren's lifeless eyes, he doesn't look like he's steaming. "Eren?" she says, slapping the titan's face as hard as she can. "Eren, wake up--"

The nape of Eren's titan starts to steam. Carla runs back and to it.

The shadow of a woman leaving the area catches her eyes. She can barely see her in the streams but she calls for her. "You!" she yells. "Was that-- was that female titan you?"

The other woman stills. She pulls her hoodie to cover more of her head. She doesn't wait, and keeps walking away.

Carla can run after her, maybe thank her for saving her, her son, and the entire city. But she turns her head back at Eren's titan and thinks the mysterious woman can wait.

The nape of Eren's titan keeps steaming, and Carla covers the lower half of her face with a part of her apron as she waits.

The titan body steams until Eren falls from the nape. He gasps and can barely push himself up to his elbows.

"Eren!" she calls for him loudly. Carla quickly helps him sit up. She checks him for injuries. Other than the lines under his eyes, she finds none.

She throws her around his body and pulls her as close as she can. "So--heavy--" she whispers, barely able to keep both of them sitting up.

This just makes her hug him harder.

"No matter how much you measure, you're still my little boy." Carla whispers into his hair. "Don't you ever forget that."

Not much Eremin this chapter. It's reserved for the next one!

Still thinking about if I should make it Dina/Carla too.

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Tell me the truth.

Chapter 18: Tell me the truth.

Heyo, how's everything.

The clocks changed again and now I don't know when's the best time to update anymore lol. Guess I'll just do it with trial and error until I find the best one again xD

For now, Enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The impact of falling on concrete on one hand, the weight of dead bodies over him on the other, it takes some time for Jean to crawl out from between the steaming pile of titan corpses.

The moment the air splitting sound of the rocks are gone, Jean rushes out and hides between destroyed rubble.

He looks up, the house they were standing on with commander Erwin and other soldiers is not reduced to a pile of rubble.

"... Commander Erwin?" Jean whispers as he walks out of his hiding spot. "Commander Erwin!?" he says a little loudly.

Jean looks up, the Beast titan is still standing tall above the walls, he is ready to throw another round and Jean curses his luck and Armin's judgment for being right again.

He dives behind another pile of rubble to hide to the best of his ability from the flying rocks, the air smells of blood after every round, making Jean's head spin.

A whimpering sound coming from his right, snaps his attention. He follows the sound until he finds a still body on the ground, Jean immediately recognises his face. "Armin! Are you injured?" Jean asks loudly, throwing Armin's body into the safe place between the houses as he sees The beast titan get ready for another round.

To his surprise, there is blood on Armin's body but no wound. Armin sits up, shaking his head. "Dumb luck. I got hit with smaller stones." he growls, holding his side after a wave of pain flooded his mind from there. "... But the impact hurt. Where is... Where is commander Erwin?"

Jean opens his mouth to say something--

--then he immediately bites his words back and looks around them, waiting for another round of stones to approach them.

"... Jean?" Armin asks, a little louder this time. "What happened to commander Erwin?"

Jean lets out a deep breath, the last moments marches in front of his mind and he just shakes the memory away. "I don't know... I don't think anyone could have survived that stone attack."

Armin froze.

He grabs Jean's hand and pulls him closer again, desperately searching for answers in his eyes. "Did you-- find him?"

Jean shakes his head. "The-The building collapsed and I-- I--"

Armin doesn't let him finish. His frightened eyes stare at the ground and his limb fingers let go of Jean's sleeve.

Another round of rocks fly past them. Armin doesn't seem to care about the buildings toppling around them and the smell of blood that rises to the air.

"My-My fault." Armin rests his head on his knees and covers his ears, pushing on his scalp hard enough to hurt. "The-The scouts are running aimlessly, Zeke is wreaking havoc, people are dying and we can't-can't do anything because I couldn't-couldn't save commander Erwin! I-"

His self destructive thoughts run on repeat, enough that all his brain is turned to mush from all these words.

Then it all halts when something heavy lands on his shoulders.

Armin slowly looks up, he doesn't know his eyes are slowly covered with tears. Jean's face glows in the little sunlight that reaches between them.

Jean shakes his head. "But he'd be very disappointed if he saw us like this." is all he says. "Come on, we need to move and find a better place to hide. With all these stones I think Eren might need some back up until the thunder spears arrive."

Armin's eyes dart around the ruined city. "Eren--" He rushes out. With his current power levels, Eren needs more than just backup. He can't face Reiner and Zeke like this.

Strong hands pull him back by his collar. Armin falls back on the ground, another round of stones miss him by an inch.

"Have you lost your mind!?" Jean yells, pulling him up to his feet. "Do you have a death-"

At that moment, an earthquake strikes through the city. Armin covers his ears, the world cracks open and Armin can barely hear Jean shouting.

"Hear me, Eldians inside of the island!" the female titan shouts, her voice angelic and demonic at the same time. Armin can hear it both with his ears and in his mind. **"I am Dina Fritz. True Queen of the walls!"**

The beast titan is frozen on the walls. The walls that crack and break with every passing second.

"My family was the ones who built these walls to protect, I can control them again." she says.

At that moment, the walls crack. They shatter and their dust makes the sky turn red. Armin hides behind the wall, his eyes dart around, watching colossal titans break from its grasp one after another. The pure titans rush somewhere but Armin doesn't know where.

"And I've gotten my power back from those who have stolen it from my family."

The pure titans attack the armored and the beast until a third cart titan appears and then run away together. Armin can watch them from between the distance between the standing colossal titans.

Without another word, Armin runs at the opposite side of the pure titans. That's where Dina and Eren have to be. Jean follows him, shouting questions Armin doesn't quite hear.

Eventually, Armin can see Carla and Eren in between the steam. "Miss Carla!" Armin yells without thinking. He runs as fast as he can towards the mother and son.

Carla sighs in relief when he sees Armin.

Armin falls to his knees, he lets Eren lay on the ground once again. He takes a good look at the other's body. He looks relatively unharmed, lacking a proper shirt but his skin was unharmed. The little titan blood on his body was vaporizing but--

"He- his head- it's steaming." Armin whispers.

"Is it a bad thing?" Carla asks suddenly.

Armin gently slaps Eren's face to wake him up, he doesn't react. "It can be..." he mumbles.

"Those words..." Jean asks, his voice breaks through the deafening silence. "It wasn't Eren's or Reiners or the beasts... It was Dina's wasn't it?"

Armin closes his eyes. "I have no idea..." he shakes his head. "All I know is that we need to seek some medical attention for Eren, NOW."

Jean can't disagree.

One week later.

His senses come back in bits and pieces.

First he feels the vibrations under his skin, then the sounds. He spends a few minutes between consciousness and sleep before he can open his eyes fully.

Eren turns to his right. something weighs on his body, pushing him back to the bed. He forces himself up to his elbows. His eyes search around the room, it's not the headquarters nor is it his and Armin's room.

It's a small place, open to the hallway with no door and big windows on his right.

Just then, his mother walks in. Eren can see the people outside his room, from their all white uniform, he can assume they are in the hospital.

Carla stops, she quickly puts the tray she was holding on a nearby nightstand. She sits on the bed, all while Eren is frozen on the spot. "Hey there..." Carla whispers, pushing some of the strand hair out of his face. "Can you talk?"

Eren opens his mouth to speak but it only leaves a dry and painful cough. So he shakes his head.

Carla ruffles his hair, she reaches for some water and pours him a cup. "Mikasa" she says, a little louder. "You were right. He's waking up."

"Mi-ka-"

"Hush, drink it first." Carla puts the cup in Eren's hand in a gentle manner. Eren accepts it. He feels his throat reborn when he slowly drinks the water in small portions.

Mikasa rushes in. She chooses to stand in a corner, her arms crossed over her chest. "Glad you're awake. You got a really bad hit to your head." Mikasa says, pointing at her own. "Your scalp was steaming pretty badly. It's been uhm... A week since the attack and you were in a coma?"

"A- co-coma?" Eren says, his voice hoarse.

She nods. "Your titan healing did all the work. Although you scared mother pretty badly with how bad you were steaming. She hasn't left your side once."

Eren spits out all the water. His shoulders immediately tense. *why did she have to slip up about my titan in front of mom!!*

"What!? No-- you have to be--"

"Relax. She knows." Mikasa says with a sigh. "She found out during the battle."

Eren stares at her.

His mind has trouble believing the meaning behind those words until memories crash his mind. Of her standing between him and Reiner. Of her futile but heartfelt attempt at keeping him back.

Eren hangs his head low, unable to hold it up.

He can't face it. Not now.

What is she feeling, Knowing his son is such a monster? Is she here to disown him? To say the words Eren has been telling himself all this time?

Gentle hands touch Eren's forehead, then it moves to cup his face and turn him to face her.

Against what Eren was thinking. her eyes are kind, not a trace of anger, frustration or hatred in her eyes. "I'd already believed you'd be full of surprises the moment I held you for the first time..." Carla whispers. Eren can never describe how her smile made the storm in his mind calm down. "Everyone is made special the moment they are born... My son just tends to be on the reckless side."

Her honeyed eyes turn serious. "Eren... Why did you keep it a secret from me?"

Shame pushes Eren's head low.

Carla takes a deep breath, her hand caresses his face. "Eren... Did you think I wouldn't react well?"

The nod he gives is weak, barely seen.

"Oh, Come here..." She pushes his head to rest on her shoulder, wrapping her hands around his body. She smiles at Mikasa too, opening one arm to welcome her in. "Come here you two..." Carla smiles, pulling Mikasa into her side. She holds both of them close to herself. "You two... You'll be the death of me..."

On the other side of the walls, Armin stills. He smiles and turns away.

He can always come back another time.

Besides, He doubted Mikasa would want to attend Commander Erwin's funeral rather than staying here.

Last time, not only Erwin Smith, none of the other lost members of the scout regiment could have the privilege of a funeral.

Now, however, Armin can stand between the rows of soldiers in the graveyard in the interior of wall Rose. As former Hange Squad and one of the only surviving members of the scout regiment, they could stand in the first row and watch Premier Zachary's speech from up close.

Sasha, Connie and Jean stand to his right. Although knew what Connie and Sasha were up to these days, Jean had completely shut himself away. Armin even failed to talk with him before the ceremony, Jean simply shrugged him off or answered with small nods and hums.

On the other hand, Moblit refused to leave Hange's side. Hange, who stayed completely emotionless. And then next to them, Levi and the special operation squad sat.

If they can be called that anymore.

With just Levi, Petra and Eld present, it could barely be called a squad anymore. Even by scouting standards.

"Now, we will call the new Commander of the scouts, Zoe Hange." Premier Zachary says, stepping back from the podium.

Moblit squeezes Hange's hand one last time, then he lets them go. Hange doesn't waste a moment on hesitation.

Next to him, Jean flinches a little. While the crowd is busy with their small talk, Jean sneaks out, slipping between the crowd and disappearing in the background.

Armin blinks in surprise. He looks back at the podium. Hange has just reached it, getting their nerves ready for the speech they were never meant to give.

Armin makes up his mind. He follows Jean out, excusing himself as he accidentally bumps into a few people on his way out.

His purple eyes search the grim graveyard.

To his surprise, he doesn't find a sign of his squadmate.

Reluctantly, Armin searches the rest of the graveyard for a sign of Jean. By the time he returns to the area, the ceremony is over and his circle of friends are gathered near the podium, and the other attendees are leaving.

Armin squeezes himself into the circle. "Hi, Sorry, I'm--"

Connie and Sasha make space for him. Hange chuckles humorlessly. They put a hand on their hips and click their tongue. "What happened, Armin? You didn't want to hear my speech?" they ask.

Armin looks down, almost awkwardly. "Uh, I'm sorry."

"It's quite alright." Hange hums. "We have more important matters to discuss."

Sasha tilts her head. "Do you think we can have a search party for Dina?" she asks out loud.

"We don't have that much time for that." Hange says. "I hate to say it, but Erwin had made a deal with Dina."

"A deal!?" Armin arches an eyebrow, his eyes immediately land on Hange. Waiting for him to confirm or deny it. To which he just shakes his head.

"Of course I don't know everything the commander did." they whisper under their breath. "But... The last time we saw her, she had attacked Commander Erwin so it's not unlikely that they've talked. Why is it relevant anyway? Not like she can use that as a legitimate excuse."

Hange takes a deep breath. "Can't risk that. Don't let her have contact with any other regiment. I need to have a talk with her." Hange orders.

They all nod.

About half a day later, when the sun is setting down and Eren's injuries are more or less completely healed, Armin finds the courage to knock on the door again.

Eren was staring out of the window, aimlessly watching the skies when he heard the knock.

His jade green eyes lit up. "Armin!" he whispers. "You're ok! I was wondering when you'd--"

Armin runs inside when Eren attempts to stand up. Armin puts his hands over Eren's shoulders and pushes him back to lay down. "Wow, Wow, slow down. You need your rest." he whispered. He sat on the edge of the bed, his purple eyes met Eren's with a smile. "How are you feeling?"

Eren smiles, he rubs the back of his neck. "Better. This rest is just awkwardly long." he whispers. "And this headache that refuses to go away."

"Headache?"

"Yeah, it's Dina's fault." he sighs loudly. "Every time we touch, or she uses her powers with me I get this headache."

This rings an alarm in Armin's mind.

Did-- Did Eren get his memories already?

Already?

what if he's--

Armin shakes his head. He needs to be over this. Before he can think of any better scenario, his mouth just asks the question. "Any uhm... Strange memories?" Armin asks. "Anything? Eren, if there is anything weighing on your mind, you know, you can tell me."

His offer makes Eren's eyes narrow and his hands fist over the cover. He turns his head to the window and his jade green eyes stare at somewhere far far away.

Armin tilts his head curiously, waiting for the answer to come.

"I've seen something actually." Eren whispers, looking at the horizon thoughtfully. "It feels like a code that I-I can't decipher yet but..."

he's telling me!

The hopeful jolt in Armin's heart is hard to cover.

it's different from last time! He's telling me!

He's telling--

Armin smiles softly. "You can tell me, we'll figure it out together."

"Yeah... About that..." Eren bites his lip. "you're in it."

Armin arches an eyebrow. "I'm in it?"

"Yeah." Eren rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. "I think... I think It's from the future."

Armin licks his lips.

come on, tell me.

don't be so shy...

I won't leave you alone in this burden like last time...

"You got me real curious here, Eren." he laughs nervously. "What is it?"

Eren bites his lips. His jade green eyes finally meet Armin's again. "It's chilly..." he starts. "We're next to a-- a very big lake. No. it's the ocean... You and me. And-- and you're hugging me like there is no tomorrow and keep repeating that it's the 'third day of fall of 854' and..."

Armin's eyes widened.

third day of fall of 854

"Eren..." he shuts his eyes. This is bad. Of all the memories, why this one? Why can't it be the rumbling? Or anything other than this?

"It's like... You're saying goodbye."

Armin sighs through his nose, he shakes his head and tries to meet Eren's eyes again--

Just to see Jade green eyes tearful and teartracks already rolling down Eren's face. He stares openly at Armin's face, his eyes tearing uncontrollably.

Armin leans closer. "Hey, don't cry..." Armin whispers, slowly wiping Eren's stray tears with his thumb. "It's probably just a nightmare..."

Eren clenches his jaw.

of course...

Eren probably sees memories that emotionally scarred him. Like last time.. .

Eren pulls back. He breaks into a laugh, angrily shoving the daring tears away. "I don't know I-- it doesn't even have anything sad in it--"

"Hush..." it's a poor attempt at silencing Eren but it works.

He won't be there to comfort him when the day actually comes, but he is here now.

Then the truth drowned Armin. There is no reason that Eren has this reaction other than he knows. Either subconsciously or has already seen the cursed memory. He's seen the consequences of Armin's deal.

The blond can only hope, with all his heart, that it's the former.

He puts his hand over Eren's tight fist and squeezes.

Three times.

Just like a habit that Eren developed recently.

(Three squeezes at the most random times, anytime Eren could get his hands on Armin's.)

"Hey, it's ok. It was probably just a nightmare." Armin repeats. "I'm here. And believe me, I won't be saying goodbye anytime soon."

Eren chuckles, he reaches for the back of Armin's head and rests his hand over his blond locks. Armin allows himself to be pulled closer, lets Eren rest their foreheads against each other. "Like I'll let you say goodbye like that." he chuckles.

"Eren..." he lets out a deep breath. "You can't--"

"I don't want a 'nice goodbye' or 'watch you leave peacefully'." he spits those words angrily.

"Oh, please..."

"Even if you wanna say goodbye. I won't let you just leave like that," he vows. "And that's a promise."

"This is not something you can fight."

Eren freezes.

He pulls back, and blinks at Armin in surprise. "What did you just say?"

"Now?"

"Repeat it..."

Armin narrows his eyes. "I don't know... Is something wrong about it?"

"You won't." Eren whispers in his hair. "You won't. You'll stay alive. And you'll live very very long. And when you die, you'll have a thousand wrinkles on your face and your hands will be shaking from old age."

Armin's lips quiver. "Eren..."

He pulls back, now, there is a bitter smile over his face.

"This is not something you can fight."

Eren shakes his head. "No. It's ok." he mumbles. He clears the last of the tears in his eyes. Eren hums thoughtfully. If it comes to getting more information about that memory, Armin can't help him with it.

Apparently the only person who can, is the one who inflicted this curse on him in the first place.

He meant it, when he said that won't be the time Armin is saying goodbye.

"So uhm... Where is Dina?" he asks.

"We truly don't know," he whispers. "It's as if she disappeared off the face of the earth. The people are talking about her. Even getting

restless over it."

Eren chuckles. "Everyone thinks she is the true ruler of the walls, don't they?"

"With the stunt she pulled, it's hard not to."

"Yeah..."

"She can do whatever she wants with the power of the titans. She can kill all the titans and kill all of us... And neither of us can stop her."

Armin swallows the lump in his throat. What did he got them into? It's hard to imagine Dina's existence as anything other than his fault.

"the only person that might be able to stand in her way is you... So make sure you don't have any physical contact until you're strong enough to keep her at bay."

Eren nods.

That's right.

No one wants something like the event in the paths to happen again. Even the thought of it makes him want to poke.

wait, no one knows about it!

"Armin I--"

Just at that moment, a soldier knocks and walks in. He's a messenger in the scout regiment. He gives a letter to Eren, from Hange, and then one to Armin. "And there is a letter for you, soldier." the messenger says, handing him a clear piece of paper.

Armin takes the paper with an eyebrow raised. He opens it while Eren is busy swallowing down his potion.

It takes all his power to keep his face neutral. The letter from the last person he expected.

We need to talk. or rather, my predecessor needs to talk to you. I've seen an interesting memory from her and you.

meet me in Trosts northern bar, at midday.

-D, or Annie. Whichever you think you'll be talking to .

There is only one person that has Annie's Titan and that's.

Armin swallows hard. "I uh, need to leave. I'll be back soon, ok? Don't move." he says, hurry dropping from his voice. He has maybe half an hour to find a bar he's never been to.

Eren arches an eyebrow. "What happened?"

"Important message."

"You ok? Are you sure you're alright?"

Armin nods. He shoves the piece of paper into his pocket and puts up a fake smile. "I have some errands to run," he says. "I'll be back soon."

Eren hums. "Section commander Hange again?" he asks with a sigh.

"... Yes." Armin answers a little unsurely.

Eren hits his forehead. "Damn... It's *commander* Hange now, isn't it?" he sighs.

Armin flinches at that, yet another failure to add to the top of thousands upon thousands.

Armin waves goodbye and rushes out of the medical wing.

Armin shouldn't be surprised the bar he was invited to was an underground bar. He pulls his hair back and walks inside, making sure the saloon doors Don't make a sound that would get the insiders attention to himself and his very obvious military uniform.

His eyes scan the inside of this bar, it looks relatively newly built, the lack of rats and disgusting smells is a good point Armin isn't willing to ignore. And of course, in a corner, there is a woman on a dark blue hood talking to the bartender.

Armin tries his luck. He passes a waiter and asks for a beer before sitting down right infront of Dina in the small, wooden table.

Dina doesn't greet him. She simply takes off her hood. Armin's shoulders relax, at least he hasn't bothered a random woman.

She holds her own pint, which she takes a big sip of. "I'll give it to you, the island's beers are good." is the first thing she says.

Armin doesn't remember much about Marley's drinks. He didn't have a chance to taste them all, but he knows the smile on Dina's face isn't because the beer is good.

(He remembers only one night, a refugee's home, a relieved family, a few cans used as cups and Jean forcing him to drink directly from the bottle that made his eyes see stars. And of course, Eren's blissed out face and passing out next to Mikasa and him with Jean, Sasha and Connie nearby.)

Armin's beer arrives. He moves it to his lips without a second thought but a sudden voice from Dina makes him stop.

"How old are you?" she asks, her eyes narrowed dangerously. Her own drink pushed aside, she takes his drink from his stunned hands.

Armin can't help but feel offended. "Why do you care?" he asks.

"There is an age limit" Dina says like it's the simplest of things. "It's always been. What? They just give it to you here? Has the king really lost his mind when putting on roles?!?"

Armin huffs. "You're obsessing over details--"

"How old are you?" Dina asks again, holding his beer away from his hand.

Armin doesn't bat an eye at that. "Sixteen going seventeen." he says. "Happy now?"

"No." Dina says calmly. But that calm doesn't reflect on the way she slams the pint on the table and calls for the bartender. "A butter beer, non alcoholic, please."

Armin narrows his eyes. "You were ready to kill people my age just a few days ago." he mumbles. "And you're suddenly not ok with me drinking?"

Dina politely smiles at the bartender. "Please, make sure it's non alcoholic. Thanks." she says all while ignoring Armin.

Armin fights the urge to roll his eyes. "You aren't here to fight with me about Alcohol regulations. What do you want?" *Spill* . He wants to shout but his rational mind bites his tongue.

Dina takes a deep breath. "Those purple eyes..." she murmurs, a smile slipping up her face. She moves her beer in the air, a finger pointed at his eyes. "You have been to the paths a couple of times, haven't you?"

All the air is sucked out of the bar.

He stares, openly and dumbly at the woman.

Of all the words to leave her mouth, Armin never expected it to be that.

He laughs awkwardly. "Paths!! Haha! I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your eyes are purple." she says, her eyes are completely serious.
"You have the heart of the founder, Young man."

Armin arches an eyebrow.

Dina shrugs. "It's said whoever has the heart of the founder, has your purple eyes." she smiles. "It's a rumor. But it's said it happens when someone travels to the paths often. The pain of this reflects in their heart and their eyes. But I never paid much mind to this anyway. It's just a name. A strange one."

Dina put her beer down. The sound of it echoes around Armin's mind. "On a serious note," she asks. "How can someone who doesn't have the founding titan have the heart of the founder?"

Armin licks his lips.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean?"

"I was raised by master manipulators and propagandists, young man, try again." Dina repeats. "Why are your eyes purple?"

There are a lot of things Armin can answer that question with, including but not limited to the truth.

However, he wonders how Ymir will react to that. The deal he made with her already is full of holes and ways for Ymir to misuse it. Will she call it off if Armin shares the secret--

Armin meets Dina's eyes. He sees intelligence in them, not a genius, not even particularly a very talented spy. But he sees knowledge. She looks like the person who would believe him if he told him the whole debacle.

(Wouldn't it be nice? To have someone to share the burden of knowledge with? Someone who might actually turn out to be a very

influential person in the government, no less?)

But the thought of Ymir taking advantage of it frightens him. It paralyzes him with fear. His mind runs a thousand thoughts a second. What if she takes it out on him somehow? Revoke the deal entirely? Or worse, what if she does something to the Eren of the paths?

"Can't someone have purple eyes, these days?" Armin says, immediately making up his mind.

The corner of her lips tips up silently. "Would have believed you. If I hadn't seen your blue eyes in her memories... Oh... What was her name? Ah, right Annie." she says, waving her hand in the air. "You were quite close, correct?"

Oh no.

Armin doesn't let his emotions show on his face, a perfect neutrality painted all over his features.

Dina leans forward. "A few days ago, I got her memories. It was fun seeing you let her go after killing half of your comrades. You let her go. And if nothing else-- you said Marley's cursed name." she growls, a deep anger rises within her. "No one knows of that name within the walls, Marley. How did you know?"

Never did he imagine that small goodbye between him and Annie would have such dire consequences.

Their conversation dies down when the bartender comes in and puts the butterbeer beer in front of Armin. Even silent, the two of them never break eye contact.

Armin lifts his butterbeer, ignoring Dina and this impending doom for a second.

"The thing is, you know too much. And that makes me wonder..."

Dina whispers, tapping her fingers against the wooden table.

"Marley? The port? Her warrior status? The other warriors? Who are you, Arlert, and why do you know so much?"

Armin doesn't take his eyes off the bartender and wonders why the butterbeer tasted like humiliation.

"Fine then, if you need some motivation." Dina growls angrily. She shoves her hands into her pocket and pulls something out, something metallic in between a string.

It dangles between her fingers, right in front of Armin's eyes.

"What is this?" Armin murmurs, then his words slowly fade away as his eyes widen in disbelief. "Im-Impossible they must have--"

A ring shines in the little light in the bar.

Not just any ring, a ring that could turn into a blade. One that Annie used to use.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. He reaches to take it from Dina's hand but she closes her fist and hides it in her hand.

"-- taken it?" Dina completes for him, she leans back and stares at the ring. "Well, I could have gotten it back. They didn't try to hide it from me when they were putting Annie's... Ahem... Body away. I'll give it to you when you give me some answers."

Dina's stormy gray eyes narrow in determination. She slides the ring until it's between them, still covered by her palm. "Do we have a deal?"

Armin grinds his teeth. "I don't understand you..." he says, trying his best not to aggravate her. "You legitimately pronounced yourself queen of the walls... Then it disappeared... Then you're asking me for answers that you can easily demand if you were queen?"

"Let me take things at my own pace. The reason the patriots turned into a pile of titan flesh was because we took things too fast, too much." Dina reminds him. "Do you really think I will endanger my life while the military is in shambles like this? Do I look stupid?"

Armin arches an eyebrow.

His answer is an eyeroll.

"I may not be a genius and able to guess stupidly accurate with little basis..." Dina chuckles. "But I listened, I listened to the rumors around this place and I don't want to mix myself until the government has sorted things out. Without Erwin, there is a very high chance of things getting out of hand again."

"What are your questions?" Armin says, his eyes fall to her hand, and the ring beneath it. "Just ask."

"I have already. Marley." she says. "How do you know they exist? Are you an Ackerman or another noble." her eyes scan him one last time. "If you are, you don't look like one."

"I'm not. I'm just observant." Armin says in his defense.

"Even observant people can't be that accurate." Dina repeats. "The name. Marley. Where did you hear it? Are you from outside the walls too? I didn't see you in her memories so I highly doubt you're another warrior."

"I'm not." Armin says between grit teeth.

"So? What are you?"

Armin grinds his teeth together hard enough to crack it. His mind suddenly buzzes with the answer to it all.

"I... Overheard them talk." he growls.

Dina arches an eyebrow.

"Berthold." he growls. "Annie's... *ally* . I overheard him talk with Reiner one day. I couldn't believe what I heard at first but then--"

Dina narrows her eyes curiously. Her hand doesn't move from over the ring. "And...?"

No, this woman isn't going to stop until I give her some dirt on myself.

might as well do it, since I can't tell her the truth.

"I set up a trap for Berthold." Armin says with a sigh, pouring too much acting into his performance. "Thinking he could kill me, Berthold spilled everything. That's how I knew Marley. I filled up the rest of the holes myself."

Dina rests her head on her free hand. "And I'm guessing that's why Berthold is dead right now?" she asks.

Armin shuts his eyes and nods.

At first, nothing happened.

Then Dina leans back. She chuckles slowly and smirks, almost viciously cruel. "Well there is some dirt under your clear facade." Dina says as a matter of fact. But she stays true to her word and lifts her hand from the ring.

She pushes her hoodie down and stands up. She throws some coins for her drink and walks away without another word.

Armin almost doesn't notice her gone. His eyes stare blankly at the ring on the table. His hands shake when he reaches for it. It's cold between his fingers.

Annie's ring. Deadly without getting any attention to itself.

He holds the ring tightly in his fist.

"I'm sorry..." he whispers, more to himself than to whoever could listen to him. "I wish... I wish we could have really said goodbye like that." he mumbles.

He shuts his eyes.

He lifts the string and ties it behind his neck, he lets the ring dangle around his neck. He hides it under his shirt and walks away.

He can't find a trail to Dina's whereabouts outside.

Dina never thought she'd be interrupted high here over the walls.

It was her new favorite spot on the island. She loves watching the titans under her feet, loved the feeling of wind over her face and watching the horizon and enjoying it for the beautiful view it is.

(She'll be lying to herself if she says her time as a pure titan didn't affect her. That she doesn't feel a rush of relief when she realizes she can have accurate senses in her hands, that her sense of smell can feel the pollen in the air and not human flesh.)

A sudden buzzing sound takes her by surprise. At first, she thought it was a garrison soldier she could shrug off but then, about twenty minutes away from her, Eren landed on her feet.

Eren looks around until his eyes suddenly land on Dina's.

"Please don't leave!" he says, holding up his hands to mean he means no harm. "I-I need to talk to you-"

Horried, Dina's eyes darted around his ODM gear and the bandages around his head. "How did you find me?" she asks, loudly.

"I knew you would be here..." Eren admits. He awkwardly rubs the back of his neck and looks at the ground of the walls. "Somewhere high. Somewhere bright..."

"That doesn't explain how you found me?"

Eren steps forward. "I looked into my fathers memories."

Dina's eyebrows twitch in barely controlled anger.

"Like that church outside of the interior. The place where you guys... You and dad... Used to look down in the internment zone of Liberio." Eren explains. "I thought... You liked heights... So I looked around the walls of Trost to find you."

Dina's eyebrows rise, they disappear under her bangs before the shock slowly wipes from her face. She doesn't take her eyes off the view of the other side of the walls.

Such a beautiful landscape. Orange hinted skies and a sun that was slowly setting behind wall Maria that was just a blurred line in the horizon. If the random movement of titans weren't there, it would have been magnificent.

Eren hums. Armin's words echo in his mind.

She can do whatever she wants with the power of the titans. She can kill all the titans and kill all of us... And neither of us can stop her.

He remembers how Armin's eyes had shaken and how he wasn't sure of the next words he spoke.

Eren clears his throat. It does manage to get her attention, but she only looks at her from the corner of her eyes with a smirk on her lips. "So... You saw more of your fathers memories." she concludes.

Eren nods. "Yeah... Watching dad with another family was kind of weird but..." he sighs loudly. "Can I ask a question?"

"You can... I just might not answer it." Dina says simply. "But please ask, I wonder what you're thinking..."

"You can control pure titan, so can Zeke- I mean the beast titan."
Eren whispers. "Is it a family trait? If it is, when aren't you controlling the titans below?"

Dina looks at the pure titans on the other side, the arches a questioning eyebrow.

"It is a family trait." Dina whispers. "But then, since neither of us carry the founding titan, we can only control Eldians who had somehow consumed our spinal fluid."

Dina rubs her chin. "So Zeke was controlling other titans." Dina asks.

"Yeah he was. You saw it in the battle of Trost, didn't you?"

Dina chuckles. "Ah, well. I kind of lost focus when I saw Zeke. So he's using all I taught him to their full extent. Not to mention, that Ksaver probably taught him even more."

"Ksaver?" Eren asks.

Dina waves her hand dismissively. "Someone unimportant..." Dina slowly fills her air with lungs. "When I was training him, I never thought he'd be my foe one day."

Then she laughs.

She puts her hands on her hips and laughs, Eren sees a flash of nervousness in her eyes but he burshes it aside. She holds her hands up and lets the wind embrace her.

"I think maybe I wasn't a very good mother..." Dina whispers out loud.

Eren chuckles. "You think?"

Dina narrows her eyes. "What do you know, boy?" she asks, challenging him. "What do you know about having a higher power in your blood?"

Eren hums. "I don't know much," he looks down at his hands. "But I know what it means to be burdened with it later on."

Eren huffs. "Listen, talking isn't really my strong suit--"

--it isn't mine either." Dina laughs. "But we have more important matters to attend to. Something in *common* ." she says. "If I get access to the founder. I can simply make all the titans on this island freeze up. Or crystalize. I'll even let you choose."

"Wow, thank you so much for these broad choices." Eren murmurs loud enough for her to hear clearly.

Dina smiles, she slowly holds her hands up and lets the wind travel in her hair and her face. "Ah... Isn't it amazing to hold so much power?"

Eren narrows his eyes. "Yeah, you have one problem, though. You need me to get to the paths --" Eren points his thumb at his chest. "-- And I don't trust *you* ."

Dina hums. "Something tells me you're not going to stop me."

"Like hell! You poisoned the commander! Attacked my mom! And-- the walls know what else!"

Dina presses her mouth to a thin line. "Ah... That... Right..." she says. "It'll be ok... Though... I'm sure that'll be an awkward conversation."

"Not if I have anything to say to it."

"You're an emotional boy aren't you!" Dina chuckles. "... Reminds me of someone."

"I still don't trust you."

"You're following what the blond boy told you, aren't you?" Dina asks.

Eren doesn't answer.

"Smart move." Dina nods. "I can only offer my royal promise." she adds, extending her hand for Eren to take.

Eren stares at her hand. "Is that even real?" he asks.

Dina shrugs. "I can make it real." she offers. "I'm the only legitimate royal around here, after all."

"That's not very reassuring but..." Eren sighs. "I suppose I can just trust my *dad's judgment*."

Dina moves her hand a little closer to Eren's. "So?" she says. "What's going to be your choice, Eren?"

Eren stares at his own hands.

If this'll give me more memories from the future...

if this'll eradicate titans...

for freedom's sake...

for Armin's--

Eren slaps his hand over Dina's, that one second of contact is enough.

"Will you just tell me what's happening?"

"There's nothing."

"You ran away! Something is bothering you, Armin."

The winter chill runs through his body but Eren doesn't let it show. Even here near the beach, it's cold. The sun is setting behind them, another day coming to an end.

He found Armin on the beach. No, he searched every beach near Liberio after the scouts got Falco's call. Then he searched every beach known in Hizurus capitol after they got another call saying he was spotted there. His senses could track Armin right in this very spot and was overjoyed to actually find him.

Eren found him here, shaking from the cold but still staring at the breathtaking view of the sunset over the ocean.

Armin hugs himself, looking away from Eren. His short hair has barely grown since he was rescued. But he still fists his hands in them just like he always does when he's stressed.

Eren can barely hold it anymore. "You're lying. Please tell me what's wrong-- I know--"

Armin sighs. "Fine, I'll tell you. Just don't ask anymore." he growls. "The Marleyans, they injected some poison or something. They said I wouldn't live for long."

Eren doesn't have to have future memories to know that's a lie. A bad one at that. A lie aimed just to change the subject.

"Marley is gone. Even when you were their prisoner--"

"Eren. Please. Stop."

For once, Eren plays into his manipulation. "Fine then... Let's do what we promised we'd do when we were kids." he says suddenly. "I don't believe you. Nothing's going to happen to you."

Eren's voice takes him off guard.

Armin stares at the beach in front of him, his eyes wide and his tongue unsure of how to voice his next words. "You mean... Our... Dream..." he whispers, not sure if Eren can hear him or not.

Eren does.

The next moment, warm hands turn him around and cup his face. Thumbs caress under Armin's eyes and all Armin can see is Eren's jade green orbs staring back at him with determination. Eren smiles as softly as he can possibly manage.

Armin's face is dry under his hands. Impossibly so. But Eren keeps caressing him, leaning just a little to kiss the blonde's forehead. "Our dream." he repeats, his eyes never shaking. "Let's do it. We're free, aren't we? Let's go explore as much as we can. Hizuru sounds like a good place to start right?"

The world is wider than they can travel.

Armin's shaking hands act on their own accord. He puts them on Eren's and Eren closes his eyes with a relieved sigh. "Armin..."

"I..." Armin murmurs. "I want..."

Eren hums, he has to summon a little bravery for what he says next. "If it's rotting, let us rot together. If it's flourishing, let us bloom together. But never let this fragile wind of life tear us apart." Eren Whispers.

Armin raises an eyebrow. "Since when are you good at literature?"

Eren chuckles. "Picked it up from one of the books Dina likes to read," he says. "So? What do you say?"

Eren leaned closer until his forehead was touching Armin's.

"You quoted it wrongly, it doesn't even rhythm properly."

"You get the memo, right?"

"Still doesn't change the fact that you quoted it wrongly."

A Garrison soldier runs through Premier Zachary's forces, screaming for the guards to make way because he holds important news.

News is far more important than any. One that could even interrupt the military meeting currently being held in his office. With Commander Pixys, Dawk, and Hange.

He barrels through the doors after a short knock. The commanders change their topic and their gaze. The poor soldier takes a deep breath to give the impossible news. "The titans!" the Garrison said. "They've all frozen still! Like crystal statues."

The four in the room freeze.

Pixys is the first to say something. "It appears we'll have a change of plans. Thanks soldier, you're dismissed." he says. The soldier salutes and closes the door behind him.

Dawk sits back down on his chair, his eyes stare at Premier Zachary and his other comrades. "Can it be just the south?"

"Maybe." Commander Hange rubs their chin, almost thoughtfully. "It'll take a while for the other stations to reach us. But I believe it's safe to say their titans are all gone as well."

"Isn't that too optimistic?" Zachary asks. "It can be fake news for all we know."

Hange shakes his head. "It's more likely that you might assume." they say as a matter of fact. "We have followed a route that Eren Yeager took when he was Missing In Action. And guess what the special operation squad found when we reached wall Maria."

Zachary arches an eyebrow.

Hange hums. "Frozen Crystal stairs made of hardened titan flesh, those are the words Private Petra described it with." they explain. "Sounds familiar, doesn't it? And that means only one thing, he and Dina have had contact again."

Before Pyxis could voice his concerns about it. The door is knocked loudly. Premier allows the door to open and three guards walk in, holding Dina in between them and holding her hands behind her back.

"For the last time, let me go peacefully please." Dina tells the guards, who are completely emotionless.

"Speak of the devil..." Hange murmurs. "Nice to finally see you." they say, much louder.

Dina pushes up a polite smile at her lips. "Aw, section-commander Hange! Did you get my present?" she asks. "Surely must have heard of all the titans being gone by now."

The four military men exchange a look.

"That would be my doing." Dina says loudly, pushing her elbow out of the guard's grip. "... You can stop manhandling me now, soldier."

Hange narrows their eyes. "Dina..." they whisper.

Dina meets their eyes. "Congratulations on your promotion and my condulensance for the reason of that promotion." Dina says with a nod of her head. Her eyes follow Neil and Pixies, she hums thoughtfully and then just bows her head out of respect. "... And I'm afraid I do not recognise anyone else from here."

"I'm guessing you are the Dina Yeager that has caused so much uprising?" Premier Zachary asks.

Dina nods. "That would be me, yes, nice to meet you. and you are?"

Zachary doesn't answer her. "What are you doing?"

Dina puts a hand over her heart. "Me?" she says. "I'm here to make a deal."

"A deal?"

"Something you will accept. I'm sure." Dina says. "You see, I was going to lay low for a little more while. Until I suddenly heard you were planning to appoint Historia to the throne."

"She is of royal blood." Pyxis says, playing with his mustache. "And she is a capable soldier."

"But not well known. Or well liked by the public. And she's sixteen. Are you planning on having another puppet monarch? because let me tell you, people aren't that naive." Dina says.

"Most of this uproar is your fault, Miss Dina. You did too much of a show." Nile reminds everyone.

"It is my right just as much as it's Historias. *and* I have the ability to reach the full potential of the founding titan." Dina snaps her finger. "That does make me a more suitable candidate."

Dina meets Hange's eyes. "Commander, have you explained to our esteemed listeners what the founding titan is capable of?" she asks. "Well, I'm not here to threaten. I'm here to offer. I shall be the queen, and I'll return the people's memories and the best chance you'll have of not being stumped under Marley's feet again."

Dina hums, shaking her head thoughtfully. "You'll keep all your power in a military sense. The rest shall be the queens. This way, you'll clear your name and the chances of another uprising would plummet. Am I correct?"

Premier Zachary laces his hands together, he whispers to himself. "That's a considerable offer. I will *think* about It."

"Perfect! Give me a week and I'll have a royal family to celebrate my coronation with." Dina says.

"A royal family?" Premier Zachary repeats.

"Yes, I already have three slots picked, two of which will be filled immediately. Two princes and a princess heir." Dina explains.

"That's a lot of places to fill." Hange whispers. "Don't you think you're looking too far ahead?"

"Oh, commander Hange... For one, I'm sure you will agree with most of my choices." Dina smiles. "Infact, you know both of the people I'm taking as princess heir and prince!" her smirk spreads wild all over her face.

Present Armin: "This is not something you can fight"

Future Armin: "This is not something you can fight"

Further future Armin: "This is not--"

Eren: "Blah Blah Blah I can't hear you! I will fight whatever it is making you sad!"

Who your heart belongs to

Chapter 19: Who your heart belongs to

Honestly, It was kinda sweet writing this chapter xD

Alot of people had many guesses about who the princess/princes where! Hope it lived up to the expectations, I loved the attention that got! Thanks for everyone who read and left and comment

A few days ago, my great aunt reminded me that god is watching when I was being extra sure No body saw what I was doing on my phone, I hope god wasn't watching because I was reading some hardcore smut at that time lol.

Anyway, Please enjoy

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Historia thinks Maybe another one sided fight from Levi would be worth escaping the castle from.

She stares out of the window. it is mesmerizing, she won't lie. She could get used to having such a view for the rest of her life.

But the reason she was offered this place...

Her train of thoughts is broken by a gentle knock on the door. "Come in!" she says, expecting it to be someone from the scouts for delivering news. He rests her head against her hand, pouting slightly.

Her eyes widen in surprise when she meets *her* instead. She walks in, her clothes still mered with dirt. It contrasted against the pristine

and clean room in this castle. Dina smiles at her and this time, it's nothing like the mad-mans smile she did last time Historia saw her.

"Good evening, Historia..." she says. "I was hoping I could talk to you in a better situation, but I'm afraid I needed to get to you before anyone else in the military did."

Historia arches an eyebrow. That explains a lot.

"Miss Dina." Historia says, no challenge or emotion in her voice. She simply acknowledges her presence.

Dina doesn't move to sit in front of Historia. She closes the distance as much as she can while still being respectful.

For a few minutes, the two just stare at each other. Taking the others' appearance fully before either of them thinks of breaking the silence. In the end, Historia casts her eyes back at the view of the window, she doesn't offer the other chair in the coffee table, deciding to ignore her until Dina says what she wants.

Dina takes a deep breath. "Do you know what your name means?" she starts.

Historia looks at her from the corner of her eyes. "I'm not interested in old fairy tales. I'm the one that gives a meaning to my name, not an ancient story."

Dina hums in agreement. "You were named after the last Queen of Eldia before the walls. Queen Historia Fritz might actually be what links our bloodline with each other. About four or five generations back."

Historia doesn't react.

"But... Your answer alone proves you're far more superior than all of us combined."

Historia blinks in surprise, she takes her eyes off of the view to meet Dina's. "I'm happy to see a royal... Who isn't consumed by a greater guilt than they can manage."

Historia blinks in surprise, what does she mean by that?

"I'm not sorry for killing your father. Him and his forefathers are directly responsible for my suffering over Marley." she says.

Historia arches an eyebrow. "Markey?"

"The place the king left us when he built the walls. The people there... Don't take kindly to us. The king left us all to suffer and laid the plans for his own peoples demise." Dina whispers. "I'm sure you understand..."

Historia hums. "Somewhat... and I don't care about his death as much as you think I do..." she cleared her throat. She pointed at the chair in front of her. "... Uhm, sit down please?"

Dina does. "I'm here to give you an offer. And some news." She says. "The news is that you won't be queen anymore."

Historia leans back. "Uhm, what?" she says, a little loudly. "But I thought--"

"There's been a change of plans." Dina tells her. "And something tells me you were not very eager about becoming a puppet Queen either."

"I had to do it." Historia shakes her head. "That's what they said- about my blood and everything."

Dina fists her robe in her fingers, gritting her teeth together. "I was wrong..." she admits. "We were all wrong to try and dictate our lives according to our ancestors. All I ever wanted was to bring the previous reign of my family to my son. I was wrong to think that was the best choice."

Dina sighs loudly. "But I can never take Zeke back now. I'm dead to him and that, I can never change." she says, she wipes a lone tear that threatens to escape from her eyes. "Although one day... I hope..."

She shakes her head. Dina presses her lips to a thin line. "It is time. To look at the future now." she says, smiling down at Historia. "And I firmly believe the one who can turn this bloodline around-- is you Historia."

Historias eyes widened in shock. "... Me?"

Her hands reach for Historias shoulders before she takes the risk and puts their reassuring weight on her shoulders. "I won't let them just shove the burden of the throne on your shoulders, of course." she adds quickly.

Historias eyes get lost in their own dreams.

"Historia, allow me to teach you all about our royal blood. Allow me to teach you all I know about Eldia and titans. So when I am gone, you are ready to take the throne of Eldia as a capable queen of this island." She says. "One day, no one will dare to disrespect you by offering the position of a puppet queen."

Historia narrows her eyes. "Wait a minute... I can't be the queen because *you* are the one taking the throne."

Dina smiles and nods.

She stands up and offers Historia a hand for a hand shake. "You don't have to accept it today." she says. "Think about it. You can be the crown princess and I can teach you all I know and the finest of everything else the kingdom has to offer."

Dina pulls her hand back, because all Historia did was stare blankly at it.

"Don't accept something just because you have the blood for it. But I can see the potential in you, you just have to nurture it." Dina tells her.

Historia closes her eyes. "You trust me alot for someone who has a lot of hate for my bloodline." she whispers.

Dina smiles knowingly. "You gained my trust when you abandoned your father... Or just let him die." she shrugged. "What better way to show your loyalties don't lie with the rest of your bloodline?"

Historia presses her mouth to a thin line. "I'll think about it." is all she says.

Dina hums to herself. "That's perfect."

After a long battle, Keith Shadis remains under the impression that he deserves some peace.

As a commandant of the training corps, he could have the liberty of taking a few days off and remain here in their own little home with Carla, as she tried to digest the shock of Eren's titans reveal.

The restaurant was closed for the time being. That gave them some lazy time the two desperately needed before their wedding.

(Which will, no doubt, be postponed after every change in their life.)

He was helping Carla set the table when their door was knocked. Keith had a hard time believing someone would come moments before lunch. "Who can that be?" Carla wonders out loud. "Eren and Mikasa didn't mention they'll come..."

Keith cleans his hands with a handkerchief and nods. "I'll answer it." he says. He walks over to the main door, he opens the door and on the other side is a woman he's never seen before. She's alone,

surprise painted all over her face when she meets his eyes. "Hello." she says with a nod. "Does Carla Yeager live here?"

Carla appeared behind him. Her eyes widen considerably and it moves from between Eren and Dina. "You're that... You're that woman..." she whispers, narrowing her eyes. "And wait... I saw a drawing of--"

The woman crosses his hands over his chest. "Well, this is going to be awkward." She takes a deep breath. "My name is Dina Fritz, nice to meet you." She offered a hand for a handshake. "We have a lot to talk about."

Carla accepted her hand shake, her eyes wide and her hand trembling.

"... So that's what happened." Historia summarize. She crosses her hands over the table and sighs loudly. "Do you think it's a trap?"

The squad is shocked into silence.

Next to her, Ymir holds her hand protectively on her shoulder. "I told you before, Historia, this woman is looking for her own gain." she assures her.

Armin, Eren and Mikasa sit opposite of them on the table, while Jean Sasha and Connie are sitting behind a table parallel to them. The trio are mostly silent, especially Jean, Who Armin had yet to talk to since Commander Erwin's memorial. Sasha eats her sweet bread while Connie stares aimlessly.

Jean lifts his head but his eyes stare somewhere far away. "Ymir isn't wrong. Last I heard of Dina and commander Erwin, she made some sort of deal with him that involved the throne." he recalls. "The commander even asked me to look entirely into Historias family and explain the complicated noble systems in Paradise." Jean met

Historia's eyes. "The most likely scenario is-- she wants to use you to get through the other nobles."

Historia narrows her eyes, almost in disgust.

"She doesn't need anyone's support!" Ymir says, a little startled.

"She has all the power she can get. That shit even got me confused. Why would someone like that need anyone's approval? She certainly needs Historia for something else."

Mikasa leans her head against her fist. "She said three people." she whispers. "Who are the other two? Maybe it's easier to guess her intentions when we know who they are."

Jean shakes his head. "That's the thing. We don't know."

Eren runs a hand through his hair. "She's not gathering people for support." he mumbles. Eren's voice makes Armin's head snap towards him. Violet eyes

if her son can make the entire population infertile...

does she really need a bunch of nobles' approval for her reign?

The memories of that day in the paths marches in front of his eyes. It makes him flinch only a little and his eyes flutter shut.

To everyone else, its invisible reaction. To Armin, it's vital information. His violet eyes stare into Eren's and wonder what he's thinking about. He won't repeat the last mistake of ignoring small details like this.

Eren is still two steps ahead of him when it comes to memories of the future. For one, Armin has changed so much Armin isn't sure how much his information is worth anymore. Secondly, Eren has the power to activate the rumbling. He still might, and the story started from moments like this. When people around them ignored Eren's small reactions.

Armin doesn't intend to make the same mistake another time.

Under the table, Armin puts his hand over Eren's tight fist. It relaxes under his touch, Eren's jade eyes meet his.

"Armin?"

Eren doesn't say a word. The same hand that was a furious fist under the covers, moved and held Armin's hand, lacing their fingers together.

"Armin?" This time, the voice is followed by a gentle tug on his shoulder. Armin almost jumps, he turns to Mikasa. She looks at her stoically and nods at Jean's direction.

"So?" Jean asks. "You're awfully quiet."

It's Eren's time to squeeze Armin's hand three times.

Armin sighs, trying to sort his thoughts into words. Dina is the unknown variable he introduced into the timeline and he has to take care of it himself. "I agree with Jean. I think the military has no other choice than to agree to her. By putting Historia as the crown princess, she can get the recognition from the nobles she can't otherwise get without violence." Armin hums. "But I have to say, she looks genuinely interested in you, Historia."

Armin rubs his temple. "You know..." he mumbles. "If we look at it at face value... Dina wants to fix her future and the titans future in one go, because I know for a fact she doesn't want to be remembered like king Fritz. Let's assume she wants to keep the titans tightly under control. So she'll need a royal and someone to hold the founding titan for him and--"

Armin's eyes widened. "Eren!" he mumbles. "Did she come to you with a similar proposal?"

Eren blinks in surprise. His hand holds Armin too tightly.

"No.." the brunet whispers. "She just told me to meet her later. Never said when. Just that she needed to deal with some bad blood first."

Armin stood up, the force of the motion threw his chair back. "We need to check on Miss Carla!" he says. "Eren, mikasa-- Hurry!"

"What's happening?" Mikasa asks, standing up with Eren. "What's wrong?"

"We need to check on your mother." Armin tells Eren. "She's probably there to sort things out before he offers *you* the second Prince spot."

"What!?" Eren yells.

"You gotta be kidding me..." Jean whispers, eyes wide.

Armin looks back at Historia. "If you want my opinion on this--" he says. "--accept it. You're no better since you're after your own good too!"

He runs out of the meeting room. Eren and Mikasa exchange a look before running after him.

Armin rushes to the stables and then rides on his horse until they reach trust. They walk silently to Carla's new home. It's Mikasa who knocks.

To Eren and Mikasa's displeasure, Keith opens the door. He moves away from the door and lets them in. Mikasa and Carla walk in the living room. Eren never thought he'd see something like this. Or perhaps, he assumed he simply thought he had the time to explain his fathers first family to her in peace.

Dina sat in front of Carla, an untouched teacup in front of her. Carla's eyes stare at the ground. Dina tries to act as understanding as she can but the information is hard to digest. She holds a tissue in her hand until her knuckles are turned white.

Eren pales. "Mom--" he chokes on the words and instead decides to stare angrily at Dina, who shakes her head.

Carla holds up a hand to stop Eren and Mikasa from intervening. "Please continue." Carla tells the other woman, "you weren't going to tell me so soon, were you Eren?"

Eren opens his mouth to say something, but words fail him and he can't do much other than sit back and watch. Armin stood behind him, some distance away from the scene.

Carla puts her hand back on her lap. "Please keep going..." Carla says, more demanding this time.

Dina, clearly uncomfortable with her hands held strictly in front of her and her shoulders tensed up. Her gray eyes never leave Carla's. "I'm not here to... Destroy the image of Grisha you had in your mind. Technically I was long dead by the time he met you." he adds the last part with a murmur. "But I thought you needed to know, considering how crucial this information is for the future of your son. I would have wanted someone to tell me the full details if I was in your shoes and Zeke was... Well..." she trails off, not finishing completely.

Dina clears her throat.

"... As I said, Grisha was saved and I was turned into a titan. you could say I died that day and Grisha lived to live another life." Dina whispers.

"I can't believe this..." Carla whispers. "Grisha? Another family? A secret mission? That's... That's surreal."

"I wish I could say it was wrong. But Grisha succeeded. He found the royal family and... Stole the founding titan. The titan that currently resides in your son's body." Dina whispers.

Carla swallows the lump in her throat. "The-the thirteen year role." she whispers, panic rising to her voice. "Does it-- Does it apply to Eren too?!?"

This time Dina looks down but nods. "It applies to everyone. Me, Zeke, Grisha, Eren. Every titan shifter that ever lived and will live." she shakes her head. "I am sorry, Carla. There is nothing that can be done."

"What role are they talking about?" Mikasa asks, staring directly into Armin's eyes.

Armin grinds her teeth together. *No! Not now! Who drops an emotional bomb like this!*

"How many!?" Carla whispers, her voice breaks into a silent sob. "How many years do you have left, Eren?"

Armin looks at the brunette from the corner of his eyes. Just like last time, his face is neutral, emotionless even. "I have eight years left. " he says simply.

"And then afterwards..."

"You don't need to think about that right now." Dina whispers, almost gently. "Believe me, if there is one person who understands what you're going through, it's me. That's why I couldn't scheme behind your back."

Oh .

Armin looks between the two. Armin never thought of it this way, that maybe it hurt Dina too, knowing her son was a titan shifter and was going to die before her. Especially as they are now...

Dina leans forward, she daringly reaches out to Carla but then pulls her hand back immediately. "I'm not going to lie, the nation needs

Eren's capabilities. And the founders. So I was planning on naming him a prince."

Eren's eyebrows twitch angrily. Armin can feel his annoyance radiating. He grabs his elbow and pulls him back, shaking his head in a clear sign of NO when their eyes meet.

Carla blinks in surprise. "A... A prince?"

"I'm going to be crowned Queen. Taking care of what Grisha left is the least I can do. Besides, you deserve more time with your family. And the capital of Mitras needs some better restaurants. And your restaurant is easily one of the best places to invest. With Eren as a prince, We can access the founding titan and the work Grisha gave his life to will finally bear fruit. And if you move to the capital, you'll be able to spend more time with your son!"

Dina stands up and hits the wrinkles off of her dress. "I will be waiting for your answer, Carla Yeager... I hoped we could meet under better circumstances." Dina whispers with a small bow of his head. "You have a lovely house. Thanks for hosting me."

"I'll walk you out." Keith whispers bitterly, suddenly appearing between her and Carla out of nowhere.

Carla nods, she stands up but immediately leaves for the kitchen. Eren urges to follow after her but Mikasa stops him, she points at Dina and goes after Carla herself.

In the kitchen, Carla sighs loudly. "That Grisha... To think... To think he had a whole mission and life I didn't know of. And Eren... His titan... Eight years!?" she covers the lower half of her face and shuts her eyes.

"Mikasa..." she whispers when she notices her presence in the room. She quickly wipes the tears silently streaming down her face with her tissue. "You won't be taken away by a sudden magical

disease or a royal government, will you? Do you have any connection to a royal family I don't know of?"

Mikasa hums thoughtfully. "I don't, mother. Don't worry." she mumbles. But the words are lacking. Mikasa can't put her mind to it enough to make more suitable words. Instead, she takes her into an embrace, hugging the crying woman as tightly as she could.

Armin has to give her the credit, for someone who just recently got in contact with the Paradisian regime, Dina seems almost suspiciously ok with every single detail of her coronation plans.

Jean has been dismissed from his apprenticeship for obvious reasons and given a few days off. Armin however, his work load had tripled in the last few days alone because of Hange's untimely promotion.

Now he understood why Moblit is always so *stressed* .

He watches them, he isn't blind. He could see the way Moblit bit his nails each time Hange suggested something more daring. The way he always was ready with his ODM because Hange had the habit of engaging into dangerous situations before everyone else.

One of the few changes Armin wasn't focusing on, but is glad it happened, is the fact Moblit is still alive.

Armin didn't notice it until a few days ago, when he saw a brand new tea in Hanges office every few hours. And then, that afternoon, Moblit appeared with lunch. Armin's jaw dropped when he saw the man alive and the way Hange seems slightly more alive than last time when commander Erwin died.

Hopefully... This Hange won't resolve themselves into a suicide in a fit of desperateness.

It's Moblit who gives him the summons.

"The soon-to-be queen has summoned you," he says, handing him the sealed letter. "Did you do anything?"

"Not that I know of..." Armin whispers to himself. He opens the letter and excuses himself from Hanges office; they don't notice him gone for the first few minutes.

He rides to the capital. To get inside, he had to show his summons three times at every gate to get inside.

And the castle stands just as proud as he remembers it to.

Armin has to wait for a few minutes, simply adoring the giant structure and its three towers held right in the middle of the capital, it could be seen from every part of the city, standing in glory.

(Armin wondered if there were any colossal titans hidden in those walls. There probably are.)

(Many parts of the castle he sees now wasn't there when he was brought as a prisoner and Historia gave the order of his execution)

(Maybe, there are colossal titans inside these walls.)

As the guards lead him to the queen's quarters, Armin's mind drifts off to the cursed memory of that day. That Day Eren brought him here after he flattened the world. That day when Historia decided he was better off dead. That his public execution would be the best for her nation.

(Maybe, it was. Who knows?)

His eyes don't see it when the two he was thinking of, appear right in front of him.

"Armin!" Eren calls in delight. He's in his full ceremonial costume, the green coat looks new, tailored perfectly to his new size and Armin can't help but wonder what that small sign of the crown meant right under his scouting logo.

Unlike him, Historia is wearing a red robe, it lacks final touches and stands almost awkwardly on her body.

Ah, so they're getting ready for the ceremony!

Eren shoos the guard away, the fact that he listens to Eren, means the crown logo did it's job.

"Armin! I'm so happy to see you here!" he says, he takes both of Armin's hands into his own. "This court is driving me crazy!!"

Historia rolls her eyes. "Don't listen to him, he's overreacting." she laughs. "Did you see Ymir? She promised she'll be here for the tests..."

"For the last time! Her titan is being trained-- that takes a lot of time!" Eren whispers.

"Court?" Armin asks, *Of course, if he's going to be a prince. He's going to attend the courts...*

Eren sighs loudly, his head hung low. "I won't be getting much of a title." Eren says, relieved. "Just enough to be able to run around the castle without problem. Unlike Historia, I don't want to be a full time royal. I'll get my room there. But still, that means I have to present myself to the council every once in a while."

Armin nods. "That's... Very logical." he hums.

Historia rubs her chin. "Something came up when we were there with the nobles that I can't wrap my head around it." she says, "do you know anything about it, Armin? Since you always know *everything*?"

It takes Armin's entire self control not to take offense by her tone.

Historia asks anyway. "Dina mentioned a third spot before. But she told the nobles today that it's just the two of us 'in the foreseeable future'."

Eren arches an eyebrow. "A third spot. But we're just two!"

"I know, that's why it's strange. There was an order for preparing a third royal room too. And everything regarding the Prince/Princesses are sets of three." Historia says she pulls out a piece of paper from her robe and hands it to Armin. "And look at this, this is the finishing blow."

He takes a hold of the paper Historia was holding. His eyes widen immediately when he sees the family tree and an empty spot reserved for the first born.

Zeke...

It only meant one thing.

Dina still wishes he would return.

Eren sighs loudly. He takes the paper back from Armin and gives it to Historia with a shrug. "I wouldn't bring it up if I were you," he says. "My half-brother is a... Sore subject."

"*you have a half-brother ??*" Historia all but yells.

"Yes, Dina's son. The first born spot. As you mentioned." Armin nods. "Don't worry, he's a titan shifter that'll die before Dina does."

"That's not very reassuring."

"He's the beast titan." Eren crosses his arms over his chest. "And you have no idea what he's capable of."

Armin makes a mental note to ask about that later.

"I have to go- I was summoned by the queen for some reason." Armin whispers. "Wait for me, ok?"

Eren's cool resolve immediately cracked. "What does she want with you!?" he murmurs, horror laced into his voice.

Armin shrugs, almost carelessly. "The sooner I'll go the sooner I'll find out."

Eren suddenly grabs his hand. "I'll come with you..."

"Eren, you don't have to."

"I know--"

"Let him go, will you?" Historia interrupts. "Maybe it's important. By the way, we still have to meet up with those tailors." she said, pointing at her own dress and Eren's. "You don't want to appear in that half made jacket do you?"

"You go, there is nothing with mine." Eren spits back. Historia doesn't wait. She waves goodbye at Armin and walks down the hallway. Armin smiles as softly as he can at Eren, putting his free hand over Eren's. "I'll be fine." he tells him. "It's not dangerous, so calm down."

Armin looks at the other end of the hallway, it opens to another door he'll have to take to reach the master bedroom. *the queen's bedroom.*

"Ok, I'll lead you there. It's a pretty confusing palace. I got lost for the first time here." Eren whispers. Armin wants to fight back, but he realizes it's actually his first time here in the eyes of this world.

(He was carried in these halls, chained and sentenced to death.)

Armin shakes his head and follows Eren's lead silently. It takes a few minutes for them to reach those double doors, it takes more minutes to convince Eren to let him meet the queen alone. But in the end, one of the guards knocks on the double doors and asks for permission. Armin hears Dina's calm voice echo as she allows his visit.

This time around, the queen's room has much more of a classic aura to it. While Historia kept it mostly simple and minimalistic, Dina has

hers decorated in every spot with paintings and sculptures from eldian legends and ancient tales. Armin feels like he's walking into a museum.

Dina herself sits behind a table, looking at a few reports with *glasses* . Armin arches an eyebrow at that.

The soon-to-be queen shuts her reports and looks up at him. Armin salutes with a small bow of his head.

"Ah! Private Arlert. I'm sure you were surprised to receive my summons." she says, removing her glasses from her eyes.

Armin nods.

Dina holds the glasses up, Armin can see the two blue jewels on each side. "Did you know, Private Arlert, that I've always needed glasses?" she says, instead of answering her own questions. "But the simplest things such as glasses cost a fortune in Marley simply because the Marleyan overprice everything for Eldians. If it's a medical need, it doesn't matter what, you'll need to be a warrior to afford healthcare."

That he knew.

Armin doesn't react to her.

"It's quite a good policy for the Marleyan government don't you think?" Dina smiles. "You have a bunch of people you don't necessarily like, you need them to have reason to kill themselves for you, so you make life so impossible they chose to shorten their lives or die as a soldier in your wars." She rests her head on her wrists. "It worked didn't it? I saw it through Annie Leanheardts memories. The boy you killed, Berthold..."

At this point, Armin thinks maybe Dina enjoys the fact Armin flinches everytime she mentions that fact.

"Had the same ambitions right? To save his father from certain death. So did that girl, Pieck. Even the galliard brothers to some extent." she sighs dramatically. "Aw, such *noble causes* ."

Armin patience snaps.

"Where do you want to go with this!?" he growls.

"Ah! You know them too!" Dina hums. "It seems Berthold Hoover has told you alot."

Armin ignores the threat in her tone.

"All of them had reasons to join the warrior training and you know it." Armin shouts. He points an angry finger at her, his hands tremble in rage. "You sent your own son there! Knowing he would kill and knowing he would suffer. They had no other choice! And you don't have the right to discriminate against them!"

"I did." Dina says, as a matter of fact. "And I regret that now. Although many people don't have the privilege of living long enough to regret." she tilts her head, pointing her glasses slightly to Armin's direction. "So you can see the view from their perspective. I have a question for you, where does your loyalties lie?"

The next anger-fueled words die in his throat.

"I asked a simple question." Dina whispers. "Where do your loyalties lie? Are you able to defend your own nation against them? People you *obviously* hold a lot of sympathy for."

"I am." *I did* . I have already done that.

Dina chuckles. "Why don't I believe you?"

Armin crosses his arms over his chest. "That's *your* problem. Not mine."

"Say, I order the Rumbling right now." Dina asks. "A feeling in my gut tells me you're going to be the head of those who oppose me."

"Because its genocide and it will get Paradise no where. Yes, I will oppose it." the words spill from Armin's lips before he can say it.

But that's not what Dina needs to hear.

Armin stops, he looks directly into her eyes and wonders. *why did you call me here today?*

is it to mark me a traitor?

is it to threaten me? To see what I'm made of? What else do I know?

"... And you know it." he says, his eyes flash with recognition. Even if she doesn't know it yet, Dina desperately needs to stay away from full rumbling. Not because it's unethical because...

"I know what?" Dina asks, blatantly challenging Armin.

"You know you'll never activate the full rumbling simply because you know it's full outcome more than anyone else." Armin tells her.

"you've heard the legends. You know how much of Paradise's structure is built on the walls. *you* know the ruins that'll be left in its wake. You know the Marleyans that'll be killed."

A smirk settles on Armin's lips.

"And you wish to restore Eldias greatness, not destroy it." he says.

"And a part of it is having good relationships with the rest of the world, right?"

Dina presses her mouth to a thin line.

"You hold a great deal of hate for the continent of Marley and its nations but--" Armin crosses his hands behind his back. "--the rest of the world? You don't necessarily hate them. You're smart. You know you can use them like the ancient Eldian empire did."

Armin tilts his head. "So why should I worry if you would activate the full rumbling when I know you won't?" he finishes.

perfect.

come on, Arlert, change the subject. Change the subject.

she always talks about Marley, never the rest of the world. At least I can rest easy she won't kill the entire world like Eren and Historia planned to--

The silence in the room is shattered by Dina's slow clapping. She smiles to herself and shakes her head. "Am I really that easy to read?" Dina asks. "And by the way, the public doesn't know about the rumbling yet, care to explain why you knew about it?"

damn it.

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line.

Dina barks a laugh. "What a knowledgeable fellow this Berthold had been. Told you too much don't you think?" she says, sarcasm dripping from her voice. "... Anyway, I liked your answer. Just one more question before I have an offer for you."

Armin narrows his eyes. "And what is that?"

"Are you able to kill them?" She asks. "When the day comes, are you able to defend your nation by killing the marleyans?"

Armin hums. "I'm doing my best to make sure that day doesn't come."

"Assume it arrived. Who will you save? A random comrade or that warrior who managed to escape alive?" she asks.

just give her the answer she wants.

"My comrade." he sighs. "It's too late to shift loyalties in an all out war."

Dina hums. She puts her glasses on the table and runs a hand through her face. "Straight to the point. I have an offer for you." Dina says. "One that I hope you'd take."

Armin arches an eyebrow. "And... What is that?"

"You're so... *observant* ." Dina says, a mockery of the words Armin had used himself. "And frankly, the only one who's judgment I can trust I'm going to need you close."

Armin's breath catches in his throat.

"I wanted to bring you into the royal family as well. But I bet Eren will have a stroke if I make you two have familial ties on paper." Dina recalls. "It was hard convincing him as it is."

She slowly pulls her reading glasses down and lets it dangle around her neck. The look in her eyes is sincere and has a hint of a smile. "Since you refuse to tell me the secret behind those purple eyes of yours and the unlimited knowledge you've proven to have--"

Armin won't put it that way.

He shakes his head and holds his arms up as if he's giving up. "There is nothing to tell, I'm just--"

"-- So I'll use your *observant* nature instead." Dina finishes for him. "As much as I can. You see things the most intelligent people are blind to. I can't let that go to waste."

Armin arches an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean expect yourself here most of the time in the next few months at least, Private Arlert." Dina tells him. "I can use your *observant* nature more often."

Dina's words still echo behind Armin's ears.

Even now, as she stands on the podium with her crown and queenly robes around her body, Armin can't help but see a mistake. An unknown variable he included in this world that he can't exclude now that she holds the most powerful position in the monarchy.

Armin stares at Eren and Historia behind the new Queen.

It makes sense. With the Royal family's tendency to keep things within the family, it's actually smart to accept Eren into the royal family and have a branch that could carry the founder without being affected by the first king's will.

Armin stares at Queen Dina Fritz who gently waves at the people, a gentle smile on her lips. Armin never thought the famous Dina Yeager would be a smart woman.

He narrows his eyes at the woman. She is a danger Armin didn't take into consideration. Of course, how stupid can Armin be? She is the last real member of the royal family who knows the secrets of royal blood. In comparison, she might be as dangerous as Zeke.

"Wow, I never thought I'd see Eren in a position like that?"

The word comes to Armin as a surprise. He turns around when a frail and old hand lands on his shoulder. "Grandpa!" he mumbles happily. "Didn't think you'd come here!"

The old man smiles, he pushes his hat up a little before he answers. "I got your invitation letter just in time." the old man says. "Wow Armin, you've... Grown a lot."

Armin touches the back of his neck awkwardly. "Thank you, Grandpa."

Now that he's here, Armin will plan to keep him here or in Stohess, far far away from future battle grounds.

Armin raised his head, and saw Eren waving in his direction.

Their eyes meet, for a moment, it's only the two of them in the entire arena, no one else neither in the crowd, nor on the podium.

Armin slowly waved back, awkwardly smiling.

Due to their close ties to Eren and Historia, their entire squad was invited to the party as the prince and princesses' friends.

Armin will certainly call it lavish and luxurious. They had all attended in their formal military wear, but another dress needed to be tailored for Carla and Historia, who are not currently in military ranking.

Armin kept to himself until that point of the ball, usually hanging around a window and far far away from nobles and high class families as much as he could. He saw the sun set and the moon rise from his spot near the windows.

Connie and Sasha celebrated that more than anyone else did. Armin's heart pangs loudly when he notices what will happen in their next battle.

Sasha...

Armin swallows hard, his Adam's Apple bobs up and down.

No... I won't let it.

I won't let it!

Not even Dina's speech to the nobles can divert his attention. He stands at the back of the crowd, and only pays vague attention to her words. He's already heard whatever it is there to hear.

The music starts, a note Armin hasn't heard before but can get lost in the violins and piano.

The next moment, his eyes catch the sight of Historia pulling Ymir into the dance floor. Their smiles are shining, *knowing* .

And Armin realizes, Mikasa's talk about Ymir practicing a dance wasn't all an exaggeration.

He smiles at them, it's sweet. It's almost... Almost makes Armin feel like his mission was worth it.

His eyes drift, he thinks about Eren. Has he changed?

Armin pushes his hands into his pockets.

Eren trusted me with his memories of the future...

he trusts me alot...

maybe this time, I won't fail him...

Maybe this time, He'll tell me before he does something malicious.

Suddenly, Eren appears in his field of vision. He has a nervous smile on his face that washes into a confident one when their eyes meet.

"Why are you... Standing alone?" he asks, standing next to him and pointing at the people dancing in the center of the ballroom.

"Everyone else is enjoying the ball..."

Armin tilts his head. "I can say the same thing about you, your highness."

Eren blinks in surprise. His body suddenly stiffens and he shakes his head. "Armin... Did you call me "your highness"?"

Armin laughs. "Sorry. Sorry, my bad." he covers the lower half of his face.

"It sounded totally wrong." Eren mumbles awkwardly.

Armin licks his lips. "Excuse me..." he clears his throat. "... *My prince* ."

"Armin!"

"Sorry, Sorry." he laughs. "You're just... So easy to tease."

Eren smirks, only half of his face smiling. "You know... I was thinking about something," he whispers. "Commander Hange will send out a small squad to search around for any titans that aren't affected."

Armin arches an eyebrow. "... And?"

"Dina ordered them to search South first." Eren smiles knowingly. "... Do you remember what's in the south?"

Armin's eyes shine. "The ocean..." he murmurs in awe.

"So..." Eren hums. "We'll see the ocean soon. Again, for the very first time."

because no one knows about the first time we saw it,

"That's for the future... But for now" Eren stands in front of him. He bows his head and offers his hand to Armin's. "May I have this dance?" Eren asks.

Armin stares at him, those movements are definitely trained for proper etiquette. Armin suddenly feels too shy about his own lack of it.

Armin swallows hard. "I'm... I'm not a good dancer." he mumbles. *I never had time to learn.*

His purple eyes look behind them. At the people who dance so slowly and naturally.

Armin knows he has two feet in any sort of dance. "I... I don't think I can..."

Eren smiles. He takes Armin's hand and raises Armin's hands to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to his fingers. "I'm not good either." he whispers into his skin.

Maybe it's the pure desire he sees in Eren's jade eyes, maybe he's been dreaming for too long. The room shifts for him. Either way, his heart wins over his brain and Armin finds himself slowly nodding.

Eren pulls him back, Armin crashes into the other's body. Eren holds his hand with his own and rests the other in his back. Armin blinks in surprise and copies his movements. "It's ok..." Eren tells him. "It's nothing serious."

Armin looks up, his heart beat in his chest maddeningly. The soft look on Eren's eyes, makes him calm down. And then, the little confidence he has shatters when he puts his foot on Eren's. "Sorry-Sorry-"

Eren's hand in his back tightens, stopping him from pulling back. "It's ok. Don't worry about others commenting either." Eren repeats. "No one will dare to say anything to you."

But people can still stare. Armin's eyes dart around the room and sees pairs of eyes looking at them, whispering amongst themselves while smiling politely when Armin stares at them for too long.

Embarrassment forces him to hide his face. "Eren- people-people are watching." Armin murmurs, he grips the fabric of Eren's custom a little too tightly and hides his face in his shoulders. "I'm getting embarrassed."

"Look at me..."

When he does, Eren leans down and presses his forehead against his, smiling. Armin lets his eyes fall closed. "The nobles will find

something wrong with us anyway." he assures him. "Might as well have fun here, right?"

Armin's anxiety doesn't die down, a thousand eyes stare at him at the same time. He thinks about pushing Eren back or finishing the dance every second. Then, Eren puts his hand behind his neck and pushes his face to his neck. "Forget them..." he whispers into his ears.

But it's not easy to forget.

Realization drowns on Armin like a cold bucket of ice. "Eren... People are staring at *you* ." Armin whispers, his eyes darting around the room and finding more than a couple of eyes fixed on Eren's head.

Eren hums. "Yeah," he confirms. "Dina warned me about this. Said I was closer to the age that nobles would start offering marriage than Historia is." he chuckles. "Also said I had my mother's "killer-look"s so I had to do something."

Armin's hands around the other tightens. "Oh really?" he can't stop the shaking in his voice.

"Yes..."

Armin intentionally pushes himself to the other, resting his hands slightly higher on Eren's neck and himself more comfortable and confident as he stares at the eyes fixed on Eren.

Eren chuckles in his ear.

Armin ignores it. "So what did she say you should do?" he whispers. Turning in their dance when it's their turn, the ballroom swirls around them in a ballad of light music.

Armin grinds his teeth angrily. *because if Dina is planning to throw Eren into an arranged marriage--*

"The queen ordered that..." Eren chuckles, he leans forward until his breath brushes against Armin's ears. "I should show them my heart is already taken."

Armin tilts his head back.

The music quickly reaches its climax, the instruments' sounds fading away as they reach the end of the music.

"Oh really?"

Armin summons all the courage he can. He lifts his hands to cup Eren's face, gently caressing under his eyes.

"Is your heart taken? Really?" he asks.

Eren nods. "Isn't that obvious?"

Armin smirks. "You mean, in this entire party," he murmurs. "Your first priority was to show people I have your heart?"

Eren doesn't say anything, he nods.

Armin has to stand on the tips of his toes to reach Eren's face. He holds the stunned brunet's face still. He can see the gazes of people burning in the back of his head, so against his finest instincts, he just kissed the corner of Eren's lips.

damn this height difference . Armin thinks as he stands normally again. "Do you think that's enough to show you're taken? And who are you taken by?" Armin whispers with a laugh.

Eren laughs too. He pulls back and takes Armin's hand. He bows down to press a soft kiss to Armin's fingers. "Thank you..." he whispers, his thumb still caresses Armin's knuckles. "You know. It wasn't convincing for some people, wanna go again?"

Armin loses the battle against the heat rising to his face.

Here we have it!

Next chapter we're going to have a timeskip and a new arc! Armins plans should really start now. His biggest nightmate, AKA the rumbling is getting close and closer *hehehe*

Oh! And my twitter is: @[Rose_lily_sun](#)

Pleas leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to let me know what you think

Of secrets, lies and fake people.

Chapter 20: Of secrets, lies and fake people.

Hi there! How's everything!

Good news everyone, this fic now has Spanish translation available [here!](#) by @ Sol_BB on wattpad!

Typically, when there's a soft scene in aot everything goes to shit so I thought, yeah! Let's adopt the same technique!

A lot of people wondered how Armin gets to Marley sooooo here ya go :D

Get ready for time skip!

WARNIING

WARNIING

Armin gets a little depressed. Death and suicide mentioned. Political schemes, canon typical violence. People drink Alcohol not don't get drunk. I am neither a doctor nor experienced in these matters!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Three years later.

Falco Grice is what people normally call a good boy.

Calm, collected, smart and loyal. Adjectives that are rarely seen together to describe a person. But they do describe Falco Grice. Even all of Armin's timeline changes and butterfly effects have done very little to change that fact.

Last time, they met after Sasha was shot.

This time, the little boy, two years younger than last time he saw her, followed him all the way to tell him he had dropped a penny.

Armin hopes the attire is appropriate for an Eldian in Marley.

He picked the oldest clothes he could find in his wardrobe and hoped for the best. He packed his bag in a hurry anyway, and hoped it would help in blend in as much as he could. He had Dinas help in picking clothes, but still--

Liberio is *cold* . Even for a city so near the ocean, it's freezing..

And Dina very cruelly said most citizens of Liberio could not afford a thick coat, so Armin couldn't take his.

He pulled his worn out coat around himself, hoping to warm himself up as he walked in the stoned streets of Liberio. In the internment zone, people ignored him. Outside, people spat on him. Armin had to ignore them all, he had only one mission from coming here and subjecting himself into this nightmare.

Find Eren .

He tells himself. Repeating and repeating and repeating it until it's all that there's in his mind. Not the cold, not the dark streets, not the strange glances from strangers.

(He swore he could see some familiar faces in the masses.)

(He ignored them)

He walked to the small communal room he was given. For all its cruelty, Loberio didn't have homeless people because of the quickly declining number of Eldians, there were always more homes than people inside.

Even if those homes lacked bathrooms, full proof walls and were just a roof above his head that could crumble any moment. Armin pushed his hands into his pockets, and made sure the small amount of money he could smuggle inside was still there.

It's not.

Armin stops in the middle of the street, his fingers poke out of a small hole in his coat. He wants to curse every god he knows. Looking down, he can see his finger from the hole and the coins have probably fallen when he was so lost in thought to notice.

"Mister!"

Armin keeps staring at his own pocket and wondered what he could do now?

calm down. You have the home, you don't need the money for searching around the internment zone.

Eren is probably around here somewhere. They still haven't drafted them to war.

Eren is hiding around here. I'll find him, take him back home. Problem solved.

"Mister!"

Armin feels someone tuck at his sleeve. He meets olive green eyes and a shy face. Armin's violet eyes recognise him instantly. Slightly younger, slightly more hopeful, a little smaller in comparison. But still so painfully Falco Grice.

He holds up a coin. "You, You dropped this, Mister." he says. Armin stares at it for a few seconds, his common sense wins and he takes the coin.

"Thank you, Young man." he says, in the best fake southern accent he can manage. Currently pretending to be someone who is surpassing their accent.

Falco steps back. "You're welcome." he says with a nod. "I... Haven't seen you around. Are you from the new refugees?" he asks.

Armin nods at the boy. "Yup. Happy to be here. Names Oswin." he says, offering a hand for a handshake. "I'm told I can take care of the library here."

"I'm Falco." Falco accepts the handshake. He nods with a smile. "... The library?" he asks. "It's been closed for so long now."

Armin tilted his head. One of the reasons he was "accepted" into Marley was the experience he forged as a teacher and librarian. He still remembers the frown on the interviewer's face. The military man almost spat in his face and made fun of every insecurity he could find, while a soldier held a gun to the back of his head.

It was easy to pretend to be an Eldian from the south. Considering how they haunted Eldians for sports there, forging papers was so easy by the Azumabito and he was told the Marleyans would never bother to check it.

Armin half expects that Marley wants to use Eldians in yet another suicide mission in its next mission and needed more meat in Liberio. There would be no other reason as to why they accepted him into their internment zone.

The more he spent here, the more he was disgusted by the Marleyan government.

Armin breaks the train of his thought. "Yes, I'm planning on reopening it." Armin smiles. "I heard the previous owner was a patriot right? And burnt it with himself inside."

Falco hums. "Yeah. I used to spend so much time there when I was little." he admits. "Will it really open again?"

"You'll be the first one to know when I open it, Falco." Armin promises.

Falco nods. "Well, See you around, Mister Oswin."

Armin waves goodbye.

"See you around Falco."

Some Eldian are in such worse positions, that Marley is their heaven. An irrefutable fact.

The continent of Marley is by far the most tolerant of the Eldian kind, going toe to toe with Hizuru simply because people have the right to breathe.

"Some have it so much worse..." Dina had said. "And yet another show of marley's intellect. Every once in a while, they choose some of the other Eldians begging to be let in Marley. On one condition, that they would be their assets within Loberio. You have no idea how many comrades we lost because non-Marleyan eldians ratted them out for some extra rations."

"And the rest?" Armin had asked. "What happens to those Marley doesn't accept?"

Dina chuckled. "Take a guess."

Armin opened his mouth to say something, then slowly closed it. His hands fisted over his lap and he said nothing, staring at Dina on the

other side of the table.

Neither could ignore the elephant in the room. The awkward tension that always led to Armin's eyes staring at the suitcase on his bed, with his clothes all over it.

Dina narrowed her eyes. She'd never been the one to hide her anger. "This is the single most ridiculous plan I've ever seen." She said for the third time this evening. "You're aware of the dangers of literally every step of the way and Liberio is a big neighborhood, it's not like you can just find Eren."

Armin closed his eyes. "I've run out of options."

"Why do you want to go after Eren so soon? You said it yourself. He'll send a letter soon, isn't it better to wait until he does?"

Armin held his elbow, his body tensed. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"No, you wouldn't understand!" Armin said a little louder. "It's all happening like-- like I thought it would. Zeke's men came. The marleyan volunteers came. We went to Marley and Eren left just like last-- I was-- I was so naive!"

He came to himself suddenly. He was gripping his hair, his eyes maddeningly wide and his breathing ragged.

And Dina stared at him, wide eyed that melted into a frown at his reaction.

Armin's hands froze. He forced his hands to let go of his hair and land back on his laps. He didn't look up from the table.

I was so naive.

I was so naive.

Why didn't you see it?

Why did you think it was any different?

Why did you let Eren leave!?!

Life happened very unexpectedly.

The span of time in which Armin was one of the unofficially highest ranking people in his nation to the time he became a refugee in Marley, is less than two months.

The span of time in which he was the happiest person in the world with everything he could wish for, and the time he finds himself alone, in danger, and lost, is two months.

Armin stares at the pile of work in front of him.

Quite literally.

Just as he was told, the library is burnt. Armin's eyes travel over the place and see more ashes and darkened wood than healthy ones.

Armin moves the boxes inside. The boxes of books and magazines that he was given yesterday with specific instructions. As the only library in Liberio, Armin had a very specific set of rules he had to follow. Every word he could put here, had to first be approved by the Marleyan government.

Armin moves the last box in and dust rises to the air when the box hits the ground. The library isn't big. Perhaps ten meters in five meters max. The empty shelves are dusted and collected bugs over the years.

"Cleaning is in order." Armin whispers at the place that would be his home for the next few days. Until he finds Eren at least. The next

group will be drafted to the mid-West allies in the next two weeks. Eren will be among them.

So Armin has two weeks to find him.

And in the past two days? NO LUCK.

Armin pulls a scarf over his nose and mouth, a habit he took from captain Levi after working under him for so long. He takes his duster and starts.

He finds a disturbing amount of rats and bugs but eventually by dinner time, the place is cleaned.

Cleaned enough to house books at least.

Ding Dong

The sound makes Armin freeze. He slowly turns around and lowers his scarf, to greet the newcomer. He isn't sure how the people will react to him. Apparently the people of Liberio are good with newcomers, So Armin doesn't have much to fear here at least.

The tiny body that walks inside shatters his expectations.

Armin blinks in surprise. "Falco..." he murmurs. "Wow! Nice to meet you here."

Falco steps in, he slowly closes the door behind him, his olive eyes fix at the boxes of books on the ground. Then his eyes darted to Armin's. "Hi, Mr Oswin, how are you doing?" he asks, a little shyly.

Armin's eyes soften. "I'm ok. Thanks for asking, how are you, how's warrior training?"

Falco's eyes widen. He grips the yellow armband around his hand and looks away. "I- I never told you I was a warrior candidate." he murmurs.

"You don't need to tell me. Besides, Isn't that something to be proud of?" he asks. "Although I am curious why you're here."

Falco touched the back of his neck. "Well, Training finished early and I thought maybe you'd need help with the library."

Armin tilted his head. "Ah, thank you Falco! But I can do it on my own, you need to keep up your strength for your training. I know how hard it is." he offers.

Falco hums. "I don't think you'd know unless you were a warrior..."

I had the memories of one in my previous life.

I still do.

sometimes, it's hard to distinguish between his memories and my own.

"Well, I have some clue." Armin offers. "I read around."

"Read around?"

"My grandfather has a bookshop." Armin says, then he quickly corrects himself. "--had a bookshop." he leaves and brings a chair for Falco to sit on. "I read a lot."

(His grandfather is still alive and thriving. Happily running his own bookshop in Stohess after he moved in three weeks after Armin's promotion and opening his own place for books and knowledge that were previously illegal.

If he knew where Armin is right now, he would probably have a heart attack.)

Falco hums. "Having so many books around is really fun." he murmurs, his eyes fixed on Armin as he opens the first box of books.

"Although sometimes I wish..."

Armin pulls the first one, it's a history book. Almost certainly mislead here and there and that's why it was approved to be here. Armin scans the hard cover and stands up. "Have you read this?" he asks Falco.

"Yeah, it was a part of our written warrior exams." He points out.

"Wait..." Armin looks at the boy. "If this library was closed for twenty years or so... How did you have access to the resources for your exams?" he asks curiously.

Falco hums. "I used my brothers. He got it from our neighbors... So on. Hand-me-downs, really. The possibility of someone actually becoming a warrior is very low, and those are pretty expensive." he explains.

One other reason as to why Marley was eager to reset this place.

"Well, good thing there's a library here now." he says and stands up. He meets Falco's eyes with the most gentle smile he could. "Are you planning on coming here a lot when it opens? I'm going fund of your enthusiasm for learning and seeing things in different perspectives."

Falco bites his lip. "I... Don't know, sir. They're going to announce the successor to the beast titan soon and if my brother isn't... I might not have the time to come here much." he says. "When will it open?"

Armin's eyes soften.

"It's open for you, You can come anytime you want, Falco." Armin offers with a smile. "Is there any specific book you're looking for?"

Falco rubbed the back of his neck. "I uh... I've been meaning to read 'The round globe' for some time now. But I couldn't find the book anywhere."

Armin's heart throbs loudly in his chest. His violet eyes lose their color. He kneels down and opens one of the boxes, his motions are more or less automatic. "A book about the outside world?" he asks, holding up the hard covered golden book up for Falco to take it.

Armin brushes away the memories he had of a similar book, so long ago, it felt like a different life.

Falco takes it and opens it immediately. Much Like Armin himself when he first saw it, Falco reads through the sentences and the light in his eyes shine brighter and brighter.

"It's the notes of an Eldian who traveled the world before Karl Fritz." Armin recites by heart. "And wrote about the wonders of the outside world. Frozen lands, water that glows like fire, mountains, forests, *Oceans* ." he recalls, the same words he spoke so happily a lifetime ago.

"Yeah!" Falco cheers. "It's the only book I've ever seen that-- doesn't talk about politics directly."

Unfortunately, That's not possible. Marley wouldn't let his strictly controlled population that much freedom. Armin knows for a fact propaganda runs very deep here, and is familiar with it, he wasn't blind when it was happening in paradise. This book isn't the same one he found in his grandfather's attic so many years ago and ran to show Eren.

"You can have it." Armin tells him. "Consider it borrowed for a while. Until I open this place, what do you think?"

Falco smiles, from eye to eye. "That would be very nice, Mister Oswin!"

"Grandpa, Are you sure you want to open this place?" Armin asked for the hundredth time. It was considered a medium sized shop in

Stoheess. Twenty by twenty meters with enough space to put everything with wide gaps between them with chairs and tables.

The old man had a shine in his eyes that Armin rarely saw, a look of pure joy. "I do." he said. "I can't sit at home, Armin. Although I'm grateful for the job I had in Carla's restaurant. Opening my own library and bookshop to let younglings like you have fun seems like a dream come true,"

Armin helped him choose the books, even set the books and helped him move the collection of illegal books he had in Shiganshina to their new place. Since they were no longer illegal, Oswin Arlert could put them on display.

Even this one.

Armin held it, bewildered that the book had survived to this day. The same book that thought then about the outside world. The same book that gave Armin the ocean and Eren his freedom.

Armin smiled to himself. He abandoned his post on tidying the shelves to go to his grandfather. "Grandpa, can I keep this?" Armin waved the book. "It brings a lot of memo--"

Armin stopped talking.

Because in a few moments Armin was gone, his grandpa put up the decoration on the walls. All of them were framed newspaper articles about him and his achievements either as Commander Hanges assistant, a member of the special operation squad, with the Marleyan volunteers-- or most notably, the Queen's advisor.

The weird nicknames he was given because of it never failed to make him laugh.

*But now, Seeing his grandpa hung up the news articles about him, with **his** photo printed on them. The old man cared for them with such delicate movements and smiled at them once he hung them up.*

"What's wrong?" he asked Armin once the last one was up on the wall, the old man's hand was shaking by age.

"Nothing..." Armin murmured, staring at his own face on one article pinned to the wooden wall. "I just... Didn't know you kept them like this."

The old man put his hand on Armin's shoulders. "Armin..." he said with a proud smile. "I've always believed in your strength from the start. Since you were a toddler. Of course I will cherish every single milestone you take."

Armin smiles back. He wanted to say something, maybe voice his embarrassment but he said nothing. Armin thinks, Nothing is more heartwarming in this world than a proud parent.

"Mister Oswin, what do you do in your free time?"

Armin takes a sip of his tea and smiles. "Like you, I read." he says, looking at Falco and his book from the corner of his eyes.

Falco hums. "No I mean... Well... When the library is closed, what do you do?"

Armin shakes his head. "Currently... I'm trying to find a friend of mine."

"Friend of yours?" Falco asks thoughtfully. "Do I know them?"

Armin shakes his head. *Not yet.*

"What's his name?"

"Eren... Kruger." Armin says, the first thing that comes to his mind. "He's an arrogant, stubborn, good for nothing man. Someone I unfortunately like very much."

Falco blinks in surprise. "Oh... So you're looking for him?" he asks, tilting his head.

"I searched every inch of Liberio. Eren isn't here." Armin finally says, clutching the hot tea in his hands. "Eren isn't here. I need to stop looking."

Falco's Olive green eyes soften, almost childishly. "You can keep looking!" he says hopefully. "Your friend has to be around here somewhere. Maybe he's in the other Eldian zones."

Maybe...

Armin closes his own book.

Maybe not...

The coming of age of any prince or princess of a nation will always be a cause of terribly long celebrations.

Poor Eren's happened to be before Historias.

Dina did all she could, from celebrating the smallest Eldian celebrations to announcing the anniversaries of great deaths. All to give back a resemblance of Eldian culture that was long lost.

To be honest, Armin doesn't care. Being an Eldian has always been a cause of pain for him, the reason his friends died and this war happened and he had to give away his own life. It all boils down to a certain genome in his very DNA. None of these celebrations of traditions actually matter to him, infact, Armin can't feel more alienated to all the customs Dina explains.

("What do you mean you never celebrated the news years with fireworks! Statues? Robes? Anything!?" Dina yelled at him that one time. On the 11th of march when the first breeze of spring came. She

slammed her hands to the throne and stood up. "What do you do!? Did you convert to Marleyan in the past 100 years? There is nothing Eldian about this place!"

Armin, standing next to her thorne and trying so hard not to let his frustrations show in front of four heads of noble clans, just shook his head.

*That made Dinas blood boil. "Get me the mayors of every major city right now!" she yelled. "This year's new year we're **celebrating** properly!" she ordered one of the soldiers.*

The four men in the room simply nodded and praised her for upholding Eldian traditions who they didn't even know what it was. Armin was unamused. He shrugged and said with the clearest voice he could: "I don't think that is a good idea."

His voice made the nobles stop immediately. Even Dina didn't expect anything from him. His opinion got him mockery from the nobles.

"What do you know about upholding tradition?"

"That is the most stupid thing I've ever heard!"

"Hah, I'm not surprised. That's what happens when an inexperienced young lad ranks so high."

Dina arched an eyebrow at him, a scowl on her face but she sat down back on her throne. "And why's that?"

"Even I don't know the things so speak of. The first king of the walls did some serious cultural cleansing when he made the walls. I assume that was because wiping the people's memories would be easier that way if you take away what made them significant from the rest of the world." he pointed out. "If we force or encourage the people to celebrate something just because people did a hundred years prior. It'll only have two reactions. One, people will be even more alienated and against it. And two, they'll delve too much into it.

Both of them will make a rift between the people instead of uniting them, and..."

Armin cleared his throat.

... That'll Provoke even more people to join the Yeagerist and extremists if they ever get made....

And who was Armin kidding? It was only a matter of time. If not Eren and floch? Then someone else.

Hatred for Marley is inevitable.

"So I'd move forward a little slower." Armin pointed out. "Let the people adjust to such changes. You don't want backlash do you?"

Dina pressed her mouth to a thin line.

She leaned her head against her fist. "You're such a killjoy." she murmured quietly enough that only Armin heard her from such a close proximity.)

The new years were held with small changes that Dina promised to do more next year.

But even against Eren's indifference and the many pointless obstacles he threw at Dinas' way, she was determined to do this ceremony the traditional way. With big giveaways and loud announcements to the public that only complicated Eren's life as a soldier of the scout regiment. It only made Eren hide his face under a hood whenever he went out or pushed himself behind Armin or Mikasa, which lost its purpose when he got taller than both of them.

Armin still wonders, to this very moment, why didn't Eren fight more against it? The Eren he knew would run away, after all, didn't he accept the position of Prince by the strict condition that he'd stay away from the drama?

Either way, Armin wore the clothes that were issued to him and showed up that night, at exactly six in the afternoon. Although Armin simply preferred to have his formal military green coat, he was slowly growing to love his dark navy suit. Armin couldn't help but enjoy the soft breeze of spring and its promise of warm temperatures.

The ballroom of the castle was huge, Armin hadn't grown accustomed to it yet. Neither did any of those faces seem familiar. The ballroom buzzed to life. He spotted commandant Shadis in the crowd. The military personnel were not present.

... And Mikasa and Jean?

Armin stared at them from the corner of his eyes. Mikasa and him talked in hushed tones and kept to themselves, so Armin chose not to approach them.

Ding Ding-

The crowd's attention moved to the doors.

"Her majesty, Queen Dina Fritz!" A man announced. Dina walked in, she smiled and waved at her guests, some bowed their heads and others nodded at. Dina started chatting with her guests one by one.

(Only Armin knew the depth of hatred Dina held for some of them.)

"Crown Princess Historia, and royal Consort, Ymir!"

The two walk hand in hand, with Ymir holding to Historias forearm. The taller one held an uninterested frown, while Historia mimicked Dina in her eagerness to please the nobles.

Armin's eyes kept glued to the door. The last person to get on, of course, would be the birthday boy himself.

"Prince Eren Yeager and Lady Carla!"

Of course, Armin wanted to laugh. Eren walked in, or more accurately, Carla pulled him in with the vice grip she had on her elbow.

The moment Eren stepped in, the crowd blew into whispers, from comments about his new physique or his status and titan. Carla eventually had to let go of her son to take her husband's hand. Armin wanted to approach him, but he was beaten by a group of eager noblewomen.

Armin waited in a corner, his hands crossed. A waiter passes in front of him and he, very boldly, asked for a drink. The poor waiter blinked in surprise, he had no choice but to give it to Armin.

The blonde looked at the wine glass for a moment, trying to remember what it tasted. A smile appeared on his face.

He drank it.

He looked around, a waiter appeared to take his glass, he asked for another. The bitterness makes him want to poke. But the taste is strangely welcome.

Dina appeared at his third, Her presence makes Armin freeze on the spot, she was frowning, clicking her tongue and shaking her head. "How old are you again, Armin?" The queen asks, a tone of sarcasm in her voice.

Armin holds up her hands and starts counting. He was nineteen when he came back in time to when he was 10 so... Armin held one... Two... Three fingers until he stopped himself. He technically has 27 years of life experience in total but in the eyes of this timeline...

Armin clears his throat. "Almost eighteen..." he murmurs.

Dina yanks the drink from his hands. "Not eighteen, no drinks, Armin." she says again. "Goodness, And I thought I can trust the

waiters." she sighs.

Armin covered his mouth as he started to hiccup. "You trust me with the--" a beat. "--top government secret but not--not Alcohol?"

Dinas dark gray eyes scanned him up and down. "Oh please, you should take a look at yourself before you assume you can take any Alcohol, young man." she shook her head.

"Tsk tsk. I'll have a talk with the waiters. This is absurd!" Dins shook her head as she walked away.

Armin's face frowned. Well, at the very least, Dinas obsession with keeping alcoholic beverages under tight control, might help with keeping Zeke's infested wine under better control.

Come to think of it...

Something in Armin's gut tells him they are near. The Marleyan volunteers are maybe packing their bags as we speak.

Something tells Armin Zeke won't just let go so easily. Even now. But now that Eren knows his true motives...

Armin rubbed his chin. He hummed to himself and decided to leave the subject to another time when the taste of alcohol wasn't giving him a stomach ache.

where's the birthday boy?

Armin's eyes searched the place, but he didn't see Eren's familiar face within the crowd. He moved around, he even asked Dina. The queen's eyes twitched angrily. "That boy..." he hummed. "I bet he ran away from the party... If I find him..."

Dina hit his shoulder. "Thanks, let's hope the nobles don't notice his absence for long."

Armin arched an eyebrow. "Why? What do the nobles want to do with Eren?"

Dina shook her head. "Well, you'll find out soon. There are... A lot of nobles want to marry into the royal family these days."

Armin blinked in surprise, his brain failed to come up with an explanation. He rubbed the side of his face. "But... Didn't Historia already proclaimed Ymir as her royal consort?"

Dina chuckled. "... Not by Historia."

Armin hit his forehead. "Oh no..." he growled.

"Of course. You know where my favors lie, Armin, but disrespecting them isn't an option." she said. "Tell Eren these words word to word if you see him, alright?" she moved away, perhaps to talk to her assistant and the soldiers.

Armin pressed his mouth to a thin line.

"Killjoy, right?"

Armin snapped his head in the voice's direction. "Ymir?" Armin mumbles, surprised. Ymir walked closer, she had her hands firmly in her pockets and a proud smirk on her lips. "Long time no see..."

She chuckles, "you're happy about that, ain't ya?" She holds up a piece of paper. She flips it in front of Armin's eyes. "The real parties in the balcony."

Armin takes it from her fingers. Ymir winks and points at the ball. "We managed to sneak Eren out." she told him. "But it's bad if you miss your boyfriend's party huh?"

Armin stuttered, the words failed him and instead, his face lit up a bright and vibrant red.

"No-not that--"

"I get it. I get it." She laughed. "The balcony, don't forget it, the second one from the left."

"How- How do you know that?"

Ymir rolled her eyes. "Listen, Listen, don't think I'm doing you a favor." she pointed out. "But if any one of those spoiled noble girls catches Eren before you do, that'll be bad for Historias and peace of mind don't you think?"

"Is that your way of saying you care?"

Ymir saluted with two fingers. "Balcony." he reminded him. She pushed her hands back into the pockets of her suit and stepped back into the dance floor, she took Historias offered hand, he two continued the party in their own little world.

Armin fixed his tie and followed what Ymir told him. The second balcony to the left, surprisingly, was the only balcony with curtains closed. Armin gently pushed the curtains away and sneaked a look at the dimly lit area.

Even in the darkness, Armin could see Eren's body leaning against the railing. "Ymir, I told you to leave me--" The brunet slowly turned around, at first, he had a look of disgust. It quickly morphed away when jade green eyes landed on him. "Armin!"

Armin smiled softly. "Hey..." he waved his hand. He crossed the distance between them to stand next to him, leaning his back against the railing. "Nice night for an escape isn't it?"

Eren ran his hand through his long brown hair, he pushed them back and away from his face. "They just won't leave me alone." he said as a matter of fact, he looked over his shoulder to stare at the curtains. "I don't want to deal with them anymore."

Armin crossed his arms over his chest, hugging himself tightly. "... Who?" he asked, staring at the ground.

"The so-called potential suitors. Those blood thirsty people who seem to see me as an opportunity to get closer to Dina." Eren threw his hands in the air. "One of them got close to me, she wasn't bad, I'll give it to her she looked good. But guess how she started a conversation with me?"

Armin tilted his head. "What?"

"She said: 'Ah, so how was life as a commoner? It must have been horrible having no other choice than to join the military.!' " Eren shook his head. "This was a good version. There was this boy, I think a year younger than us. He came up and failed to say anything other than compliment my looks. Then this other girl she just-- she had completely turned her face and hair around and--"

Eren blinked in surprise, his jade eyes met Armin's and he shook his head repeatedly. "She'd bleached her hair blonde. And uhm..." Eren looked away so Armin couldn't see the heat rising to her face. "... Used contacts to make her eyes blue."

Armin hummed. Then it settled in his mind with a sudden surge of emotions.

"... She tried her best to get my attention with so many gifts... But she failed, I think."

Armin looked away. "Why?"

"It was obvious she was putting up a mask, to imitate someone else, but her mask lacked a few things."

Armin's eyes stayed on the tiles of the ground.

Anger rose to his heart, he hugged himself a little tightly and wished he could actually see this woman. She lacked something. Something enough to make Eren look away.

But she was good enough that Eren looked at her.

Armin grinded his teeth together.

Feather-light touches trailed down his jaw, until it settled under his chin and pushed Armin's head up, their eyes met. Eren's fingers moved to a firmer grip, preventing Armin from even attempting to look away. "Ah, there it is..." Eren's lip spread into a grin. His thumb caress Armin's slightly parted lips.

Armin blinked in shock.

"I... Didn't give you a birthday present." he mumbled.

Eren leaned closer. "It's ok..." his face is close enough that they share the same breath. "Your presence is enough of a gift."

Armin's eyes narrowed curiously. "I have an idea about a gift..." he whispered. A hand sneaked into the back of Eren's head and fisted some of his hair. Armin licked his lips with a smile. He crosses that one inch and presses his lips to Eren's.

Eren froze out of shock. The small gesture finished before Eren could fully react. When Armin pulled back, Eren chased after him again, rushing back into the kiss. Eren pulled back, and rested their foreheads together.

Eren laughed, he pulled Armin's body closer against his. "You know, a birthday gift ought to be special..." Eren murmurs, his hand moves to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear. "... We kiss all the time."

Armin laughed quietly. His hands hold on to Eren's collar. "I don't think three times can be considered all the time..." Armin whispered back.

"I'd love to make it a constant habit." Eren whispered, His hands stayed firmly around the blond. "Everyone can see it, you know, all the suitors dress up like you and try to act like you and even bleach their hair the same color as you and try to get their hand on blue contact lenses."

Eren kissed above Armin's eyebrow. "But, none of them can imitate the look in your eyes, The determination, the character." he whispered it into Armin's ears. He kissed his jaw and trailed kisses down his neck.

Armin gasped. "Er-Eren we-we can be--"

"Seen?" Eren tempted, he pulled back to stare right into Armin's soul. His violet eyes widened. "We won't."

To hell with it.

It's Armin who summoned all the courage he could manage. He cupped Eren's face and stood on his tiptoes. But even that wasn't enough to reach Eren's lips when he's standing fully tall.

The other chuckled. "You're too small." he whispered.

"Nope, you're just so tall." Armin shot back.

Eren rolled his eyes, he held Armin by the back of his head and slammed his lips against Armin's softer ones. Armin tilted his head, letting Eren deepen the kiss. Armin's hands caress the other's cheek. He moaned into the kiss when Eren bit in his lower lip.

"Eren! Where did you disappear to!"

Both of them froze, neither could react on time as the curtains moved and Carla walked into the balcony. "Eren are you--" she stops immediately, her eyes meeting with her son's.

Armin squirmed loudly and pushed Eren back, struggling to fix the tie and not to fall down as he stepped away from Eren.

Carla covers her smile and shakes her head. "I'll... Leave you to it." she said, "sorry for interrupting, I'll tell Dina you haven't run away."

Eren narrows his eyes, heat rising to his face. "... Thanks?"

"I got accepted!"

Armin has been putting the books back on the shelves when Falco says it. The little boy jumps up and down, he rushed into the library a few minutes ago and searched behind the shelves to find Armin. He says the words in the most whispered tone he can manage, not to disturb the one single other reader in the room.

Armin climbs down the ladder, he offers the most sincere smile he can manage without slipping his own disapproval into it. "That's great news, Falco, all that studying paid off, huh?" he murmurs.

Falco smiles. "Yeah well, we'll see, I guess. The good news is Gabi got accepted too!" he says. "I met the others. A boy, Udo, and another Girl, Zoofia, too!"

Armin's heart squeezes painfully in his chest. "Uh..."

Thankfully, Falco doesn't notice his lack of comfort around the subject. It's Armin's new normal, after all.

Armin clears his throat. The day of the draft is getting nearer and nearer. Three days from now, the Eldian soldiers will be sent to yet another battle. Three days for Armin to find Eren before he enlists somehow and he'll be forever out of reach.

"That's nice, Falco. I guess neither of them are really bookworms like you, huh?" he smiles. "Or else I would have met them."

"Udo is." Falco recalls. "He loves reading. His parents are a little paranoid. They're refugees! Like you!"

Armin laughs awkwardly. "So I've heard... You speak so highly of them, I wish I could meet them."

"You can, we'll keep training for now." Falco whispers.

Armin blinks in surprise. "But... Aren't you guys getting drafted to war?" he asks.

The little boy's excitement leaks out of his eyes. His shoulders fall and his fingers find his bag to grip anxiously. "Not me... My brother will go." Falco hums. "Colt. You know him right? He came here a couple of times."

Armin nods. "Yes, I remember him. He's hard to forget." he mumbles. "Are you..."

Falco swallows hard. "It's his last test..." he says, swallowing the lump in his throat. "If he survives... He'll be the successor of the beast titan."

Falco doesn't need to talk, Armin can see the nervous sweat on his face, and the trembling on his hands that doesn't still no matter how much he grips his bag.

"I hope he does." Falco mumbles. "But I-- I wish--"

Armin puts his hand on his shoulder, silencing whatever Falco meant to say. He kneels down to be eye level with the boy. "These walls have ears..." he whispers in the boy's ear. His violet eyes meet Falco's and he slowly shakes his head.

Don't say it.

I know you don't want your brother to shorten his life.

I know you don't want your friend to do so either.

but please... Don't say it here... Where they can hear.

Falco swallows hard.

"I wish... I hope he gets the best result possible." he says outloud, a little louder than before.

Armin nods in a job-well-done manner.

Falco sprints out of the library immediately.

Mikasa tries to get him out of his shell. She fails.

Armin knows Jean is watching him very closely. He doesn't want to see him like this. A member of his squad but more importantly, a friend he's so close to.

It's as if Armin has reverted back to his paranoid, socially anxious younger self to their eyes.

Which isn't a wrong assumption. Back then, Armin had traveled back in time fresh from Eren's betrayal. And now, even after so many changes and so many chances, he got betrayed by this Eren too.

That day, the whole squad, minus Ymir who went to visit Historia in the castle, gathered to find a solution in the scouts headquarters.

They had three problems.

First, Eren, who had disappeared in their mission to Liberio and left a letter saying he was doing and visiting Zeke this for the good of Eldia.

Then, Historia, who was confined to the castle grounds because of a certain quarrel with Queen Dina. And no matter how hard Ymir tried, she failed to understand what the relation between Eren's act of rebellion had with Historia paying the price.

(The princesses silence didn't help at all)

And lastly, Armin, who had shut himself in his room and blamed it all on himself. He even refused to see the queen. The food that was left in his room was returned untouched. And neither of their friends could get him to talk.

In the end, they didn't find a good solution for the first two, but Mikasa had an idea about how to get Armin to open up.

After all, back in their cadet days, Armin had two people who voluntarily spent time with. Marco and Annie.

Annie was dead, but Marco wasn't.

Knock Knock Knock.

Armin didn't want to lift his head from the pillow. The pillow wasn't soft, neither was it comfortable. But the blonds head felt too heavy to even attempt it.

Whoever was behind the door, they could just turn around and leave. Jean would say whatever he wanted to say, Connie and Sasha would tell him all about the dessert they left in his food today, Mikasa wouldn't say a word.

She would even give up After a while.

Hange understood his absence. But Dina didn't.

But no, god forbid her majesty the queen would come in person. The guards would come, and he'd leave all of them until they tire and leave.

His room had gathered dust the way it never did, his lungs started to ache, coughing relentlessly every time he tried so much as to move around his room, not to mention the pile of unread books and...

And Eren's untouched bed.

Armin can't even look at it. He had to look away and curse under his breath.

Why? After everything, why would he do it again? Why would he leave? Why would he--

What's his reasoning this time? What was more important to Eren than him and his opinion this time?

Armin dreaded the possible answers as much as he dreaded how in this world is he going to tell all the ghosts that died because of his crusade that their death was worth it?

How is he going to tell Annie he failed?

The person behind the door didn't give up. Armin heard faint clicks coming from the door. To his surprise, the lock actually gave in and the door opened.

Marco stepped in, Armin can recognise him from miles and miles away. He was in his full MP uniform, the sign of the unicorn stood proudly on his green suit. His face changed only a little by maturing fully but his smile remained as warm as eevee.

Armin stared at him.

"Marco?" Armin mumbled, his eyes blinking in surprise as the man steps in. He waves his hand, a nervous smile on his freckled face. "Hi! Jean called me and I--Uhm..." Marco stopped himself.

Armin kept staring.

Marco rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry I broke in. Been dealing with alot of thieves and maniacs and I--Uhm-- kinda picked up the art of lock picking." he said with a gentle smile. "I was worried. Jean explained everything and I just wanted to check on you."

Armin kept staring at him, his mind completely blank.

Marco looked down. "I'm sorry I broke in. I just needed to make sure you're ok." his hand touched the MP symbol on his chest. "In this work I panic whenever I see a closed door. Glad to see you're better than I thought."

Armin looks down on the bed.

Better?

What part of this is better? He'd been better when he was literally moments away from being executed. He didn't want to look in the mirror because he was afraid of what'll greet him. His hair sensed all greasy and uncomfortable, it hasn't been groomed in days after all. It's long, unbearably long. Longer than it's ever been because Armin didn't feel the need to cut it like last time.

*It was useless. **He** was useless. He went back in time and altered people's lives for the worst, stripped time from peoples lives and killed others altogether.*

"Hey, Armin... Are you..?"

Marco gently kneels down in front of him. His smile is gentle and radiates warmth. "I can make some hot chocolate... If you want."

Marco... Marco... Marco... Marco loves hot chocolate now. He got absolutely addicted to it the moment the Marleyan volunteers made the first cup.

And Marco himself made wonderful ones.

Armin found himself nodding. Marco stood up, he promptly ignored the mess of Armin's room, and Eren's absence, and went straight to boil the water and cocoa powder.

Armin watched him. Watched him as he moved around his room, cleaned some of the cups and mixed the cocoa and sugar.

Armin's heart relaxed a little. His shoulders slumped down and he sat up completely. His efforts... Aren't all bad.

Marco is here.

A living, breathing, proof that his work was good enough.

The reward for his hard work, no matter how bloody his hands had become, was right here. Standing with a good resume and reaching the dream he always had.

At any other time, he would tear up.

It takes a few minutes until a warm cup of hot cocoa is in his hands. Marco sat down next to him, his own cup in his hands. "So, any news?" he asked.

Armin wrapped both of his hands around the cup and lifted it to his face. The moment the tasty sweet liquid touched his tongue he wanted to devour it all. He drank it all in one sip, and cleaned his lips with the back of his hand. "Thanks..." he mumbled, his eyes slowly registering the world around him when he tasted the much needed sugar.

*Marco's smile never flinched. "You're welcome!" he said. "You should see this cafe, Armin. Near Stohess and it's **magnificent**."*

Armin chuckled. "Maybe you should quit being an MP and... And open a cafe..." he mumbled quietly, not sure if Marco even heard him.

"Maybe." Marco shrugged. "I love all these new tastes and flavors that come from beyond the walls." Marco moved his cup in the air. "But seriously-- I'd consider it if I was fifteen again!"

Armin chuckled.

Yeah, every normal person would change something if they turned fifteen again. strange how Armin chose to make the same mistakes.

His heart skipped a beat.

Pain and numbness followed the left side of his chest and arm. Armin stilled, his eyes widened and he gasped loudly. The cup fell from his hand, it rolled down the bed and fell to the ground. Armin pushed on his heart, the pain wouldn't go away.

"Armin?" Marco asked, he put a hand on his back. "Are you ok?"

Armin swallowed, his adams apple bobbed. "What-- what date is it?" he said, suddenly very tired.

"It's uhm... 24th I think. 24th of September." Marco answers.

Armin's body freezes. "It's... It's 853..." he licked his lips. "It's... It's the third day of fall!"

Marco looked around. "Uhm, yeah." he nodded. "What's wrong with that? Did I forget someone's birthday?"

Armin swallowed the lump in his throat, his hands started to shake but he balled them into fists above his heart.

Third day of fall.

Year 853.

Armin's time was already up.

One more year of his pathetic life is left until Ymir takes up her payment.

It made Armin's eyes tear up.

One more fall, winter, spring and summer left to prevent a worldwide catastrophe.

And Armin was wasting them like this.

When Marco hugged him and rocked him back and forth, Armin noticed he had been crying.

"Are you sure that's good?" Jean asked. "He's crying his eyes out..."

Mikasa looked back at the open door. "It's better than nothing... At least..." she swallowed hard. "... At least he's showing some emotion.

Armin is older.

Older, wiser, about 60 times bigger than what he was at ten years old thanks to the colossal titan.

And...

The world shifts around him. He is on top of his colossal titan, battling Eren who is trying to get back to his worm to restart the rumbling after his nape was blown up. Annie, Pieck and Reiner try their best to fight off the eldians who were turned into titans.

Connie, Gabi and Jean among them.

Armin lost sight of them somewhere in the midst of the fight.

"He's in the mouth! I'll do it!" Mikasa yells suddenly. Armin looks at her, she jumps down from Falco's titan. She and Levi take off towards Eren's colossal titan, it doesn't take a genius to guess what she means. Tears well up in Armin's eyes but he persists.

He uses his colossal power to put more distance between Eren and this worm being. They fight hand to hand. Until Levi fires a thunderspear and breaks Eren's teeth. Mikasa jumps in.

Armin's heart skips a beat.

As if time is frozen for a few seconds, nothing happens. Armin blinks in surprise, he stares into Eren's titan eyes.

Then--

Eren lets out another roar of anger. As if his power had multiplied, he pushed Armin away like he weighed nothing. Armin fought but Eren was insanely stronger, after a few punches to Armin's head, he completely lost mobility.

Armin's titan falls down. Eren's titan is the one that stands tall and looks down at Armin's steaming titan like he's less than dirt.

Armin closes his eyes and embraces the ground. No matter how much he forces his titan body to move, it simply won't. Too much tension on it has caused his spinal cords to collapse. And unless Armin makes another titan body, this one is useless.

Armin's titan body starts to steam. But he looks up at Eren, waiting for his next move.

He does something Armin can never forget.

He spits Mikasa's body out.

Armin's eyes follow her body as she plummets to the ground.

Eren is two steps away from the worm being, he kicks Reiner away and he's met his goal.

Yellow lightning engulfs the area. It's enough to blinden Armin momentarily. The steam that rises from the body is enough to knock the breath out of any human.

And the sight of the skeletons of the founding titan is enough to make everyone's heart give up on hope.

With Eren's scream, the titans continue their march.

THUMP.

They crush humans and pure titans alike. For most, it's a choice of whether wanting to be alive or crushed.

(What lovely choices.)

THUMP.

Armin detaches himself from the steaming body of his colossal. His feet shake as he stands up and tries to run. Run towards where he saw Mikasa fall. He prayed to whoever was listening that what his rational mind was telling him was not true.

THUMP.

THUMP.

He runs with shaking feet and wavering thoughts.

He falls to his knees when he sees a woman on the dirt. It takes a few moments for his tired mind to realize this is Mikasa covered in grime and dirt and spit and the blade she had taken to kill Eren in her own abdomen. She is facing the ground

She isn't breathing.

She isn't bleeding.

Armin wakes up to a thick layer of sweat over his skin. He gasps awake as reality slowly settles around him.

He rushes out of the bed and stumbles into the bathroom, he fills the sink just to splash his face with coldest water he has ever touched. A few more tries and sleep completely leaves his body.

He stares at himself, he had cut his hair in a hurry. Just a few days before he came to Marley, he took a scissor to his hair and tried to cut his hair himself, but he missed the short haircut anyway. Dina ended up calling someone to fix the mess he made in his hair.

He even looks like his alternative self now, the same one that couldn't do anything but watch as Eren wreaked havoc.

Armin covers his face, pushing his hands over his eyes, His teeth grinded together and eyes tightly shut.

Damn you.

It's tomorrow! The drafting is tomorrow and tonight, there is a press meeting for it!

Armin turns off the tap and rushes back inside the bedroom, he searches through his bag until he finds a kitchen knife.

Armin leans against the wall and slides down until he's sitting on the ground. Armin stares at the knife. It reflects the moonlight to the roof, if Armin concentrates hard enough, he can see his own reflection on the blade.

He needs to know.

He always thought his knowledge about the future was enough. He thought it was enough to keep Eren and the changes were enough to keep Eren from going with that suicidal mission of his.

Turns out, it isn't.

And the only person that can answer his questions is in the paths.

The reason why he's in the paths is still a big question mark. How? Or more importantly, Why did he stay in paths while everyone else's souls were altered thanks to Armin's many changes in the timeline.

And yet...

Armin freezes.

A ghost passes through him. her, because he knows who she is, cold hands squeeze his shoulder. Then pierce through his chest, his heart gives out for a single moment before it starts beating again, this time too fast.

Get over yourself.

Armin puts the knife over his wrist, it would take a single slice, deep enough in this one and the other wrist, and he can visit Eren and take all the information he needs.

The sharp edge of the dagger shakes against his skin no matter how much Armin tries to steal it.

No, this'll get nasty. How am I going to clean all the blood when I get back?

How are you going to clean any blood? You're killing yourself, whatever way you come up with, it'll leave something you can't clean once you wake up again.

Cursing under his breath, Armin slowly removes the dagger from near his skin and throws it across the room in a fit of half contained anger.

What is Eren of the paths going to tell him that he doesn't already know, anyway?

If anything, he'll *mock* him. He'll mock him and make jokes of him for all he did. All he did will get to nothing if Eren does the rumbling again.

Nothing.

The deaths.

The sacrifices.

Armin runs a hand through his much shorter blond hair and pulls it out of his scalp, it hurts, but the pain is grounding.

All for *nothing* .

FOR NOTHI--

Armin's attention sparks when a blank letter is slid under his door. A single, white piece of paper that slides under the gap of the door. Armin jumps. He picks up the paper and looks around it. Simple and empty, just as they had agreed on.

Armin quickly changes into a coat and pants he can wear outside. Something that won't make him freeze. Armin walks as quietly as he could outside the building and into the first right corner, just as they'd planned.

The alleyway is empty, dark and cold. A cool breeze passes between the narrow space and Armin's eyes look around frantically. Until a heavy hand lands on his shoulder and grips him tight. "You look like shit."

Armin has to physically stop himself from making a noise. He slowly turns around, where he meets Kenny Ackerman in the flesh. The old man taps his fedora hat back and chuckles. "Nothing like the famed Arlert I know," he laughs.

Armin chooses to ignore his words. Armin left Dina with very vague instructions, he isn't a bit surprised that the queen had to pull a lot of strange strings to make Armin's half baked plan a reality. Asking for help from Kenny Ackerman?

Armin never thought Dina would go that far. After all, didn't she call anyone with the slightest connection to the previous monarchs of the wall a traitor?

Armin takes a good look at the old man, he's dressed in full ODM. Of course the only person who could sneak in and out of Marley like this would be him.

"Did you bring what I asked for?" Armin asks, it's a pointless question to ask because Kenny is actually holding a bag strapped to his own ODM.

Kenny clicks his tongue. "Sure, but I'm afraid her majesty the queen told me to bring you back to paradise," he says. "In one piece."

Armin holds his hand up.

A beat passes, Kenny disconnects the bag from his ODM and drops it in Armin's hands.

Armin opens the bag and immediately starts putting on the harness. Kenny arches an eyebrow. "I thought that was for easing your escape with Yeager tomorrow. You found him already?"

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line as he adjusts the chest piece.

"You'll find him tomorrow?"

"No, I didn't find him and there's a change of plans." Armin says as a matter of fact.

Time for plan B.

The press meeting tonight. Where Marley and its allies are discussing the matter. How they'll crush their enemies. How they'll handle the refugees.

A meeting very similar to the same one Hange wanted them to attend. The same one Eren disappeared after.

"Well, too bad. The queen said I ought to bring you back if you can't find him." Kenny repeats.

"Tell her I said thanks. But I have other plans."

"Don't tell me you wanna stay in this shitty rathole."

"No." Armin says truthfully. "But I can't come back either, tell Dina that Eren will come back with his own two feet once I'm done."

Kenny clicks his tongue. "I don't know what you're thinking. But are you high, kiddo?" Kenny asks again.

Armin waits for a minute.

Is the probability of his success very low?

Yes.

Does he have any other choice?

"No." Armin says firmly as he fixes the wrist piece.

"Then whatcha thinking?"

"There is only reason convincing enough for Eren not to attack Marley, and that's If I'm in it." Armin says as a matter of fact.

Kenny leans forward, getting his ear closer to Armin's height.

"Excuse me?"

"I said..." Armin clears his throat. "Tell Dina, Eren will return with his own two feet. Because he won't dare to attack Marley if I'm their prisoner."

"Ok, kid, what did you smoke? Heroin? Weed? Shit ton of alcohol? This plan leaks of--"

Armin narrows his eyes. "You never cared for titles and orders. So I won't revert you of all people. But If I would, you're aware the queen herself put my word as the same authority as hers in her absence, correct?"

Hopefully, Kenny Ackerman would stop it.

He did. The old man rolls his eyes and nods his hat. "Knock yourself out," he says. He aims his hand to the top of the roof and silently zips away, the next moment, Armin is left completely alone in the streets of Liberio.

Armin sighs. He fixes the last pieces of the ODM. Sneaking out of Liberio will be much easier with these. He just had to return to his room to get more appropriate clothes for the conference he's about to clash with.

Armin flies through the back of the internment zone as silently as he can manage. He has to stop to take a breath on the tops of the walls of Liberio, his stark black clothes helps infinitely with stealth but yet, Armin can't help but feel he's being followed.

Armin jumps into the Marleyan side. He keeps flying through empty streets, the sounds of which the Marleyan citizens can never recognize as an ODM gear.

And if Armin manages to win through his plans and stop Eren, they never will know what it feels like to hear the sound of an ODM.

Armin stops a few streets away from the city council. He drops his ODM and lits it on fire in a dumpster, the gas containers and the wires burn into ash. The rest of it won't give much of a clue to the Marleyan even if it was discovered.

Armin changes back into a suit. A dark blue one, one he sneaked in and was surprised when the security in Liberio didn't take it from him. He fixes his tie and pushes his hat back on his head as he walks towards the open doors of the city hall.

He can already hear their loud shouts, promising victory, and the two representatives talked and shouted their union as if this wasn't all a show.

Armin bumps into a few people until he can squeeze himself inside and sits down on the second row. He can clearly see the two military representatives' faces. In the previous life, he only knew Magath, but Armin knows that once upon a time, Magath had a general.

And this uninterested man with the most tired look on his face and a red robin over his clothes, must be that man.

"... This war has gone too far." The general says, looking at the reporters and especially the one standing in front of his podium.

Armin takes a deep breath, he has to wait, he has to wait until the subject of the matter is related to paradise. And he has to make the loudest possible introduction he can and hope at least *one* of the newspapers present are brave enough to publish the news.

In silence, they'll try to kill him.

Not that they'll manage to, but they'll try. And Eren won't notice him gone.

But if the word gets out, Eren will hear, and he will be outraged. Hopefully. *Hopefully*, Armin has managed to keep Eren from becoming that detached, emotionless, man.

Although these days, he's not sure of anything regarding Eren.

He can only hope.

The reporter finishes and thanks the general for answering. The old man nods and another reporter walks up. He takes a deep breath and asks: "Since the mid-west allies have attacked Marley, the war with paradise has been put on hold. Is there any update? Considering a lot of people are looking forward to that."

The general stares blankly at the reporters for a moment before he leans forward. "Any and all information about the war with paradise is confidential until further notice."

Armin arches an eyebrow.

Are they really that ashamed to admit all the ships they send even remotely close to paradise's borders sinks?

Armin has to fight the smile that creeps up to his face. The idea of a defensive wall kilometers away from Paradise shores was Armin's idea to not be caught off guard when the Marleyan volunteers arrive.

oh, I bet the news that Yelena's man are helping paradise is pretty unpleasant for them.

The reporter is more insistent than his petit body shows. "But sir, this has been Marley's longest and most important military mission so far!" he argues. "Are we safe from the rumbling? The people need to know because no matter how much Marley fights with its other neighbors, the threat of the rumbling is something that concerns all of us."

Armin sighs.

He was starting to hope he had more time to gather his thoughts.

The other men on the generals' right answers that. "The threat of the rumbling and those devils is ever present!" he says. "That is why Marley is doing its best to fight them off. That's exactly why the details need to be kept a secret."

The general nods. "We're doing everything we can, but I'm afraid the threat of the rumbling will remain until we capture the founding titan or there is a breathing soul on paradise island."

Armin's eyes soften, they give up.

He's tired.

He's tired of hearing this same excuses over and over and over--

Why don't they just talk it through!? For once? Why don't they--

Armin doesn't need to think.

Even the thought of standing up and shouting here, getting all the attention to himself like he'd planned, paralyzes his entire body. His feet freeze and his tongue turns to lead.

What is he going to say to them anyway?

Time slows down, Armin stares as the reporter goes away in slow motion.

Remember, Armin, when your entire body is frozen by fear, that's the moment you know you need to jump.

His grandfather's words make his eyes widen.

Then he takes a deep calming breath.

"That's not true! Paradise will never start the rumbling unprovoked!" he yells at the tops of his lungs. His violet eyes stare seriously into the eyes of the general and the commander next to him. Both narrow their eyes at him.

He can see hundreds of heads in his direction.

Of course, even suggesting something like this in Marley's current situation is absurd.

Armin balls his hands into fists on his sides. It takes a lot of courage not to take his eyes off of the general.

Get it together, Coward.

this is no time to back off.

It's too late, he might as well finish the plan. Armin hits his fist against his chest. "My name is Armin Arlert." he declares loudly. "And I'm an Eldian of Paradise Island!"

The audible gasps coming from the crowd is enough proof of its own. He has very little time to say what he wants before he's inevitably arrested.

CLICK

CLICK

CLICK

Guns and cameras point at him at the same time. The guns are already pointed his way. But with guns, there are also eyes staring deep into his soul.

"And I come here on behalf of queen Dina Fritz to say, We do not want war with either of the nations present or not present!" Armin shouts. "And the world is safe from the rumbling as long as we are not attacked and provoked!"

"What are you waiting for? ARREST THAT MADMAN!" the commander shouts.

Soldiers throw themselves at Armin. The reporters flee from around him. Armin never moves away, he keeps staring deep into the generals eyes.

The soldiers yank his hands back and kick his knees to make him kneel down. One eye presses him hard to the ground, enough to make his face bruise.

You're welcome. He wants to say, but the Marleyans don't know what Armin is doing for them.

Who is Armin kidding? He's doing this for himself, and to stop Eren from committing the worst mistake of his life and to stop his friends from dying.

They shout into Armin's hair and yank him back on his feet. The cameras click even harder. Armin can't help but smile. Armin hangs on to this hope with every fiber of his being.

That Eren's words weren't a lie. That Armin *means* something to him.

Enough that he won't attack Marley when they have Armin as a hostage.

On the other side of the world, an old man wonders where the sudden pain and anxiety in his heart came from.

"Maybe my grandson did something again." He thinks out loud as he drinks his tea, looking out at the view of the city of stohess. "I'll write a letter to Armin this afternoon... He hasn't told me about any strange thing lately."

The tea quickly turns bitter no matter how much sugar he puts in it.

awkward laughter

Eren, you should not have left.

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make me happy and let me know what you think!

Torture chambers.

Chapter 21: Torture chambers.

Phew. Here we are.

If you have me on twitter you know I struggled so damn much with writing the torture scenes. Which this chapter is all about. This is perhaps one if the darkest parts of this fic/ all my fics.

Hope you'll enjoy it.

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

this chapter contains torture and minor death and some manipulations. Please do not take it seriously these are all words on paper that although I researched alot for, may be scientifically false. The torture itself includes cutting, fingers and eye will be damaged, choking, and some psychological torture.

If you're uncomfortable with any if these kindly consider skipping this chapter. Thanks

((Please check the warnings in authors note))

Queen of paradise.

Logically speaking, she should have changed the name of this nation. This place looks nothing like paradise, not from up here in the

castle anyway. Dina looks down at the city of Mitras and observes people in their daily lives, nothing looks strange. They're just normal people who go on with their daily lives.

Dina tells herself she has to be proud of this. Before her, people didn't have the luxury of knowing they will be alive tomorrow or a titans food, but it's hard to think like that with the recent news.

She crosses her arms over her chest.

they wanted to betray me?

these people deserve nothing.

Her mind wanders to Historia and Eren, a part of her still despises them for what they've done. It's alright, she'll have time to teach them a lesson later when Eren is actually on the island.

The doors are knocked, Dina sighs and looks at her own reflection in the window. She fixes any stray hairs and her clothes to present as the perfect queen and shouts:"come in."

A soldier walks in, Dina doesn't turn to face him. "Your majesty, Kenny Ackerman is here."

Dina grinds her teeth together. "Alone?" she asks.

"Yes."

that bastard.

"Let him in." she says. "Make sure the palace is secured. No one leaves the grounds or enters it without my explicit permission."

The soldier salutes. "Yes, your majesty."

The doors open completely and Kennys heavy footsteps echo in the otherwise empty room.

Dinas eyes are glued to the window. She looks at the man from his reflection. He hits his fedora hat up and snorts. "Come on, your majesty, I did what you asked." he says.

"I told you to bring them back and you came back empty handed." Dina says, turning her head around. "For someone with a clear streak as yours, it's not like you to fail."

The man tips his hat on, he chews on the end of the cigarette on his lips, before holding it with two fingers. "You ordered me to go after Arlert. He ordered me to let him go. Technically speaking. It's a mission well done." he shrugs. "Besides. Yeager wasn't with him. And the blondies a suicidal at heart."

Dina arches an eyebrow.

Kenny chuckles. He picks up a folded newspaper from his pocket and holds it up for the queen to take it. "I want to give you the news before any of your spies or the Hizurus get the chance." he smiles. "Isn't that the best part about being her majesty's personal assassin?"

Dina glares at him angrily. She takes the newspaper from his hand and opens it. Armin's face plastered on the front page is the first thing that catches her eyes.

"NO RUMBLING" says the self-proclaimed ambassador from the island devils.

Last night in the allies nations press conference, with more than 40 nations present, a man proclaims himself as a man from paradise and their queen's representative to say they- quote- "won't use rumbling unless provoked" who is this man and is Eldia rising again?

-more on page 2.

Followed by a picture of Armin, and it's clearly Armin, in the middle of his speech.

Dinas blood starts to boil. She quickly goes to the second page and scans the little paragraph because of course they didn't have more time to write.

Long story short, Armin has been arrested.

And his self-righteous speech was twisted by the media. Dina stumbles to her throne and falls on it, still holding on to the newspaper and staring at Armin's face.

That boy is lucky he came out alive.

The papers fold under her hands. "Idiot!!" she yells. "Stupid, suicidal idiot!" she yells and balls the newspaper and throws it away.

Armin is too frail.

Too much, so many, now that Dina thinks about it she didn't see many of her comrades that day, that fateful day they were all lined up and turned into titans. Many of them didn't live through the torture.

And Armin falls too much into the criteria of those who won't last it.

Dina grinds her teeth and stands up, she does her best to stop the adrenaline rush and the constant push of her memories of her time by the Marleyans hands. She turns to Kenny. "You..." she murmurs through grit teeth. "... Why didn't you stop him?"

Kenny shrugs. "Not my place to say anything, your majesty. This is Arlert we're talking about. He's a psyche no one ever knows what he's doing."

Dina sighs loudly and rubs her temples. *he's right.*

I still don't know how Armin knows the shit he knows.

Dina rests her forearm on the cold window. Then puts her forehead on it. Somehow, the cold is comforting. "Lady Kyomi. Bring her here." she orders. "And the court. An emergency meeting."

Kenny Ackerman tips off his hat, and leaves as he's told.

"You know what we do to rebellious Eldians here?"

Armin stares into the eyes of the policeman. His eyes are wrinkled and a deep shade of brown. Armin opens and closes his wrist from where they are cuffed to the table.

The dark room is lit by one single lamp. Armin can see half of the man's face clearly and another person standing in the shadows, silently observing.

Armin doesn't break eye contact. "I am aware," he tells the policeman. "Actually, I assumed the military would take it from here. They always had a special interest in foreign Eldians, right?"

"What? You want to hear about your crimes? You violated city rules and came here without a permission pass. You'll be the police guest for now." he snarls. "Listen, punk. I've kept this city clean of scum like you for twenty years now, and now someone comes and ruins my perfect score. Twice. Don't think I'm going to let this pass."

The second police man in the shadows steps into the light. "So, you know something about this, punk?"

Armin tilts his head.

He studies the second man's features very carefully. His eyes, still battle hardened as ever, stare at his very soul. "... About what?" he asks, he doesn't mean for his voice to be so hoarse.

"This."

The other man slams a newspaper on the table. "This, fucker. You can read, right?" he removes his hands so Armin can read the title. Armin thanks every god he ever heard of that he had enough

clearance to ask Dina to teach him some Marleyan before he came here.

Marleyan base destroyed,

Forefront of the fight with the allied midwest suffers through imminent damage because of an explosion in the front lines. Investigations prove the explosion pattern matches that of a titan transforming. While all the warrior units were stationed a hundred miles east.

-more at page 5.

Armin blinks in surprise.

That has to be-- that has to be Eren! Eren revealed himself in a fit of rage...

Eren is... Probably going back home with his titan! He-- He broke up his plans!

The joy must have shown in his face.

A sharp sound leaves his mouth. His head hits the metal table, skin breaks and his right forehead starts to throb. The man lets go of the back of his head, the impact on the metal table was hard enough that makes Armin's vision swim for a moment. "What are you smiling for?" the policeman asks.

The warm pool under his forehead makes him lift his head, even when the colors mix in the air. Armin smiles, his grin merged with blood. "I succeeded, saved their lives." he laughs weakly. *"You're welcome ."*

"You're a fun one. Who sent you?" the man spits the words out with endless venom.

Armin tries to open and close his hands, it's possible but it hurts against the cuffs under the table. "I've already told you." he tells the

first police officer. "Queen Dina. Although I volunteered and came on my own."

"Who else is with you?" the other says, slamming her hand against the table. "And don't lie. We'll know it."

Armin takes a deep breath. "I came alone," he says.

Suddenly the man yanks his hair, he pulls hard enough that Armin's neck starts to ache. Armin grinds his teeth together but keeps his eyes on the man. His breath *stinks* . Armin wonders if they choose their policemen from people who deliberately look like monsters.

"Listen, scum." he whispers. Armin forces himself not to react when he pulls his hair a little further and pushes his head to the table.

"We're not here to play games with you. So be done with it and answer our questions. When the military comes, they won't be as kind as we, you know."

The pressure disappears. The policeman steps back. "How did you come here?"

went to Hizuru then boarded the ship like everyone else .

Armin licks his lip. The rest doesn't really matter. They can do what they want all they want. Eren has revealed himself, his plans to start the rumbling are now gone for good.

Hopefully .

"You deaf!?"

Armin shakes his head. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that." Armin admits. He knows what awaits him after this.

A crack sound comes from his face, the impact strikes his head to his side. Blood runs down Armin's nose. his eyes blur.

Colors spin around his head until the man yanks his hair back to keep his head still again.

This time, the policeman has a wicked smile on his face that reaches his eyes. "That's more like it." he murmurs. "Look at that look on your face, you're a baby in this aren't you?"

Armin bites his tongue.

Any word can aggravate him.

"It's not everyday I get fresh under my hands."

Armin shuts his eyes, "whatever helps you..."

The man doesn't get the chance to restart his question. The door in the back of the room is opened and the policemen are called.

The moment they are out of the room, Armin lets out a deep, happy sigh.

Eren is back home! Probably. He wouldn't go anywhere else.

he's probably alright at home. How much does it take to go to paradise by titan foot ?

The door opens again and this time, the men who come and get him are clearly soldiers. Eldian soldiers.

Once one of them comes close enough, Armin finally gets a clear look on his face. His eyes narrow and he realizes the man has a very familiar look.

Colt Grice undoes the cuffs on his hands and redoes them behind his back. "Move." he says and pushes him up to his feet.

Ah! So Magath is in charge of me from now on.

He turns around to look at Colt from the corner of his eyes. "I'm sorry by the--" he tries to say, but Colts pull his hands back painfully.

"Think Falco's name once, I don't care if it's a high security prison, I'll come and end you myself." he whispers quietly enough that no one can hear or record it. "Move." he orders louder.

The other Eldian soldiers follow them out.

Armin sees commander Magath outside of the room, right before his eyes are covered.

1

2

3

Armin will be lying if he said it wasn't his first time in a car.

He counted the seconds. And although he had no idea about the possible speed of the vehicle, he guessed a random number.

130

131

132

Every once in a while, The car will hit a bumpy road that'd make Armin move. He's immediately welcomed by a cold pistol to his forehead.

1134

1135

1136

Armin keeps his breathing steady. The sound coming from the engine takes a turn and becomes louder, faster, Armin's heart skips a beat. Where were they headed? Certainly a military base but where?

3254

3255

3256

Wait-- are they going to ship him back to paradise as a titan?

Will Eren of the paths save him like that? Obviously. Ymir seems too determined not to let him die.

4321

4322

432--

The vehicle stops. The back of his shirt is grabbed and he's pushed out of the car. Armin stumbles not to fall with his hands behind his back. Cold air brushes over his skin and he shivers.

oh, so it's somewhere even colder than Liberio. A military zone. Let's say 4323 seconds. About an hour and ten minutes with 100 kilometers per hour average velocity, that means we were about 117 kilometers away from Liberio.

Nope, I'm not shipped to paradise. This is perhaps a military base.

Armin is pushed forward aimlessly, a firm grip on his shoulder at all times and another soldier holding his elbow. They push him forward in what feels like snow and stone.

And then, concrete.

"Where are you taking me?" he asks finally when a door opens, the sound of it echoes.

The grip on his shoulder twists. "None of your business, devil." he says calmly. "Now shut up before your tongue is cut."

"If you cut my tongue then how will I answer your questions?" he asks.

"Don't talk to him, Porco." Colt says, Armin knows Colts voice and oh dear, that means--

Porco Galliard. He never thought about what happened to him with Ymir still in paradise. So he's not a warrior, obviously, but then--

Porco pushes him faster. "Walk." he demands angrily. "I don't want to look at your damned face for one more minute. It's because of you I'm in this shady place."

duly noted. So it's not a normal military base.

I'm guessing it's a prison.

somewhere to keep people like him. Maybe a torture center?

It makes Armin laugh hysterically.

"Porco." Colt shots as warning. "Don't worry, he's gonna have enough."

The next few minutes are spent in silence. Until a key clicks and a metallic door opens with a creak. He's pushed into another place until the back of his knee hits a cold metal.

A chair...

Armin immediately jumps. He tries to push in the opposite direction of the chair but Colt and Porco push him back to the chair.

The metal chair is freezing! Even over his clothes, it abuses his skin and he pushes himself back up with all his power.

Which is nothing, compared to the other two.

The warrior candidates push him down on the chair by his shoulders. The ropes bind his wrists to the chair and then his ankles. He grits his teeth together. The ropes burn against his skin when he moves, tight enough to restrict blood flow to his limbs.

And then a hand touches his forehead and pushes his head back completely.

Snap.

They let go of his head. Armin pushes his head forward. a gasp leaves his throat when his throat hits something.

His sense of touch offers little of what's happening around him, but he's definitely strapped down to a special chair, one with a circle of metal loosely around his neck and keeping the movements restricted. Which begs the question, why do they need his head secured?

The sound of clothes ruffling.

"Let's go." Colt tells his friend. "We need to leave."

"Pathetic." Porco says for a moment. "You guys should have just been eaten alive on that mission."

Armin chuckles. "I'm afraid that's not possible. Although Marley tried its best." he debated with himself whether he should provoke these two. It feels so needed, a desperate man's last move. He laughs and shakes his head. "One of the people who were eaten in that operation was Marcel Galliard too, wasn't it?"

His collar is grabbed and pulled until the neck piece presses roughly against Armin's throat. Armin just smiles and wishes he could see

Porcos face.

If only this blind fold would go away...

"Don't you dare--"

"Porco PORCO!"

Colt broke Porcos grip on Armin and forcefully pushed him back.
"Let's leave," he says. "He's a devil. He just wants to provoke you."

"DIDN'T YOU HEAR WHAT HE SAID!?"

A soft, calming whisper.

"I know. I heard it. But even Marcel wouldn't want you bothering over his words, ok? Let's leave. This place is making me sick."

A few heavy footsteps echo. Until one suddenly stops.

"Say all you want. Marley will have the last laugh over you Devils."

That makes Armin smirk.

The footsteps continue. They go and go and go until it's a faint movement in the background and Armin's ears give up on following them.

Drip...

Drip...

Drip...

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. Is it possible for somewhere to be this quiet? The sound of dripping water droplets echoes at least three times before his ears pick it up. He can hear the sound of his own breathing and his heartbeat, which is slowly turning up.

What will they do to him?

He sure needs to say goodbye to his fingers because it's so stereotypical Armin wants to laugh. But what else? They sure don't need to secure his neck for that.

Armin tries to move his hands. The veins are throbbing and it's immovable. He tries his feet and it's the same. Armin sighs when he thinks about it more thoroughly. He doubted they would let him out of this for a bathroom break either.

He pushes back and forth, the chair moves, so it's not nailed to the ground.

Wait a minute...

I didn't hear Colt and Porco close the doors behind them.

He thinks about what's in front of him. An open door, a dark cell. Maybe there is light coming from the other side. Some sunlight? Or a torch?

No. He would have heard it if there was a torch or a lamp around and--

A blood curdling scream echoes in the building. It makes Armin flinch. He tries to find where the sound is coming from. But he hears no clear direction. It's a feminine voice and it's coming from the open door and the building itself. Someone screaming, screaming-- screaming.

Endlessly.

Armin rests his head back, mindful not to touch the neck piece too much.

He doesn't need to wonder for long. He'll get to experience whatever performance is being done.

Soon enough.

Armin Arlert looks definitely human.

Magath has been around enough eldians to know what they are and how they work. Trained too many of them to know neither of them can turn into titans at will these days, they're all Marley's pawn and Magath takes infinite pride in his part.

That's why the military trusted him with this devil too. Because he knows the Eldians better than anyone in the Marleyan Military.

Magath stares at the other from the other side of the one-way mirror. Arlert sits still, unnaturally still.

Colt walks in and salutes, a hand held up in respect. "Commander Magath." Colt says with a nod. "The reports you wanted."

Magath nods. "And the confirmations?"

"We just received word from the Azumabito." Colt says, his eyes drift to the one way mirror of the cell. "He is exactly who he says he is. Lady Kyumi of the Azumabito even confirmed it after seeing his picture."

"Get to the point." Magath snaps. "I'll read the details in your report later."

Colt takes a deep breath. "Armin Arlert, no special Eldian breed or titans in his body. He's labeled as 'the third prince' or the 'Queens true son'. Apparently, Arlert is their most trusted advisor and his word has the same authority as the queens. He doesn't look the part but he's officially courting their Prince too."

Magath arches an eyebrow. "That's awfully a lot of titles for someone who came alone."

Colt takes a sharp breath and nods.

Magath narrows his eyes. *No. That's suspicious. There is a grand plan in motion here. I need more confirmation.*

"What was he doing while in Marley?"

"He apparently first came here as a refuge." Colt recites. "And reopened Liberio's library due to Marley's demand."

Magath takes the papers from Colt's hands. He scans the papers and evidence presented to him, he even picks up Lady Kiyomi's official letter. He had his suspicions that the Azumabito would sooner or later contact whatever's left of Eldia.

This just confirms it.

He opens the letter and starts reading:

To the General of great Marley,

I do not deny the accusations. I, Kyomi Azumabito and a small handful of my immediate family visited paradise island for the sole intention of inspecting it for natural mines. We found it strangely devoid of any titans and contacted some of its people. We have been in contact with them ever since, without Hizuru knowing and acting as a rebel.

We offer our greatest apologies. As this message sends, we agree to your deal if you promise our safety. We are not aware of Paradise's inner workings or choices however the Queen Armin Arlert referred to does exist. Arlert himself is her advisor and a good friend of the crown princess and lately courting the prince.

With the little contact I had with them, I understand Arlert is someone of great importance within paradise. Even if we ignore his ties to the royal family, he is the apprentice of the commander of the scouting

legion, the same legion that defeated Marley's warrior unit not so long ago. Rumor has it he is in the chain of command along with another boy his age.

That's all the information yours truly possesses that is worth mentioning. We hope Marley ignores our mistake and this information proves useful in making the world a better place.

-Kyomi Azumabito .

Magath pushes the letter back in.

"And oh, sir." Colt says. "Warrior Braun is here. He can prove useful in--"

"Call him in." Magath says, snapping the folder shut. Colt nods and rushes out.

Magath needs more confirmation.

The look on Reiners eyes when he sees the person strapped to the chair is enough for him. A soldier's worry dances in his eyes. "... Armin?" the stone cold warrior whispers.

"So you know him." Magath concludes. " I don't remember reading about him in your reports."

Reiner narrows his eyes. "He was just a normal soldier back then-- is he really..." Reiner runs a hand through his face. "Hah. Of course. It's Armin we're talking about. He knew about Ymir. He knew about me. Of course he'd be stupid enough to--"

Reiner stops himself. The light immediately dies as he looks at his commander. "What will happen to him now?" he asks, the facade of a warrior slips back up.

Magath shakes his head. "You can leave."

Reiner opens his mouth to say something. Then he stops. His cold eyes look back at Armin again.

"Island devils..." he whispers before he walks out.

pitter patter

pitter patter

Armin's body tenses up immediately when he hears the sound of footsteps from so far away. He takes a deep breath to calm his nerves down.

His first guess was right, the door was open because The man opens nothing as he walks in. "Ah, here's my mission." he says. Something dangles in his hand, metal against metal until a bag falls to the ground. He walks over and Armin stills all his muscles when he feels the man touch the blindfold.

He rips it from his eyes. Armin's vision clears after a few blinks. He was right, the only light was coming from outside the cell, the door was wide open and the new person is a man. A blond, tall, middle-aged man with a ring on his ring finger. He stares at him. "Hello, I'll be your handler for now." the man smiles. He throws the blind fold away. "I hate it they cover the prisoners eyes."

Armin is surprised to see the man has his dagger in hand already. His eyes fall to the shiny weapon, the man catches him staring. "It's Mid-western." he offers, his tone as if he was talking to a friend. He shows Armin the dagger for closer inspection. "It's traditional too. One of my treasures. Had it before the war began."

The man smirks. Armin sees nothing in his brown eyes. "Where are my manners? I'm Captain Justivs. Or well, the prisoners call me 'the bird'. Why?" he Chuckles. "I have no clue. And you are?"

Armin blinks in surprise.

Didn't he know? Is this a part of the questioning? The torture?

Armin arches an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you know already?"

"I know, I just want to hear it from you." the man tips his dagger up.
"Come on, say it. It's simple, say your name."

If this part is meant to confuse him, it's working spectacularly. Armin shuts his mouth, snapping his teeth tightly together and staring at the man, or the bird.

The man's smile only grows. "Are you going to make this complicated for yourself?" he says. "I never like to go straight to the point but..."

His hand suddenly lands on Armin's shoulder, a tight and uncomfortable grip. "Listen, it's not always I have an Eldian under my hand." he chuckles. "These days it's all spies! Mid-western, Northerner, southerner, you get it. I rarely get Eldians these days. Oh but you..."

The man flips the dagger in his hand. "Everything is special about you. From your status to your violet eyes. I've never seen violet eyes." he says. "You're like a fine wine. A rare beverage that's meant to be sipped slowly and not gulped."

slash

Armin's eyes widen, his senses catch up to the cut slowly. Under his left eye feels warm, then it starts to bleed and burn, a drop falls down his face.

"What's your name?" the man asks again.

Armin keeps his mouth shut.

The torturer smiles, he wipes the drop of blood with his thumb. Armin notices how precise it was, deep enough to hurt but not to bleed

heavily. The bird looks back up at Armin. "Since it's your first time I'll go easy on you." he says. "I think I'll use my favorite on you more."

Armin stares at the man. He stands up and flips his dagger in his hands. He holds the blade, only the top of it out from between his thumb and fingers. "It's a simple question, your name?"

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line.

It happens faster than Armin can process it. A sharp, flashing second later, The knife nicks his cheek right under his right eye, a small bruise that bleeds down his face.

Another cut right over his left eyebrow, Armin hisses suddenly and pulls his head back as much as the neck restrains allow it.

so that's why these things are here.

He pushes Armin head back and still by his forehead. An emotionless look on his face as he drags the cold surface of the blade over the blonde's face. "Come on, you know I know. Saying it won't make it better or worse." he whispers in Armin's ear.

Armin shuts his eyes.

So the man flips his dagger again. Slash after slash on Armin's face until his entire face is littered with cuts. At some point, Armin starts panting, and the man runs out of places to cut on Armin's face and neck.

The cuts burn, Armin has a mind that the dagger is coated with something. Normal cuts don't burn like this, as if salt is poured on it.

And everytime... The same question.

Cut after cut after cut after cut until Armin's face feels numb, non-existent, too much. Armin's breath pants loudly, the adrenaline numbs his face but heightens the next cut with such startling clarity that makes him shiver Every time.

Why?

Why does he want to hear his name?

The bird holds the dagger under Armin's eyes threateningly. "Look, I've ran out of places to cut."

Armin's ragged breathing echoes all around the room.

What's the game he's playing?

it's not like he'll stop if I say my name.

doesn't he know it? Am I going through this pain for nothing?

'The bird' stares at Armin's left eye. "I know violet eyes are special. It's the first pair of violet eyes I'm going to cut." he opens Armin's eyelids with one hand and holds the dagger threateningly close to it.

"One last time, what is your name?" the man repeats.

Armin's body trembles. The dagger over his skin feels suddenly freezing.

he won't... He won't do it... He's bluffing...

Armin's heart beats maddeningly in his chest.

He won't use something like an eye for information he already--

The man slashes his dagger without any other warning.

Armin screams. Every nerve in the face is on fire. He snaps his head from left to right to try to get rid of the feeling, it doesn't, it only heightens.

That's when his eyes tear up.

Or well, eye.

"Ah, look at you..." 'the bird's voice makes him want to vomit. Armin looks up, tears rolling down his face from one eye and blood from the other. His torturer's voice makes every nerve in his body shiver.

"Now that you know I'm not pulling any punches." The torturer grabs Armin's face again, this time pulling the healthy eye open.

Armin flinches back. "no, no, let me go, LET ME GO!!" he yells at the top of his lungs, trashing endlessly in his chair.

"You have only one clear way out. Tell me," The man doesn't bother with any of it. He presses the dagger under Armin's only healthy eye. "What... Is your name?" he asks again.

If this goes any further--

"... Armin." Armin whispers so quietly he barely hears his own voice. He shuts his eyes and the tears and blood flood faster. "Armin Arlert... Please just stop it-- why'd you do that for--"

"See! That wasn't hard at all!" The bird says, he steps back and pats Armin on his head. "Nice to meet you, Armin!"

Armin looks down, shame and confusion flood his body. Why did he do that? Why did he do that?

Why did he do all that for INFORMATION HE ALREADY HAD?

Why did Armin cripple himself for INFORMATION HE'D GIVEN THEM HIMSELF?

WHY DID I RESIST IT--

Armin lets out a shaking gasp.

'The bird' looks at his cuffed hands. "Ah, look at this." The bird shakes his head, Armin's fingers have turned blue. Either from the cold of the lack of blood flow. The tips of his fingers feel numb but for whatever reason, the touch of the dagger is sharp on his senses.

"These'll get my attention tomorrow." The torturer smiles. "For now, I'll have to go. It was fun spending time with you Armin."

Armin watches him leave. The man turns around the corner and walks away, leaving Armin on his chair with one eye relapsed and bleeding.

Eventually his tears stop.

The blood doesn't.

Armin is as numb to the passing of time as he has grown numb to the sticky sensation of blood on his face.

If it wasn't for the light outside the open door of his cell disappearing and reappearing, Armin wouldn't have understood the next day had already come.

And so did the bird.

The man appears in front of him, he drops the bag just like yesterday and flips his favorite dagger in front of Armin's face. "Ah, are you happy to see me?" he laughs. Armin fists his hand to stop them from trembling.

The man hums and leans down to be eye level with Armin. "I talked it over with a few friends of mine. Doctors. They'll take a look at you after we're done today."

Or a clip, scissor, Armin doesn't know what it is. It's metallic and huge and it's shining against the dim light--

The bird puts a hand on Armin's shoulder. "How did you come to Liberio?" the bird says. "Answer this like yesterday and we don't even need to start."

Armin blinks in surprise.

Are these people sadistic!? Is it another round of hurting just to pull information out of Armin that they already know!?

Confusion is written all over Armin's face. What was these people's game? Did they know it and were playing with him or they didn't and wanted to find out like this.

All rational thoughts completely leave Armin's brain when the large tool, that looks like pruning shears up close, open and 'The bird' puts Armin's index finger in between the cutting edges. Armin shrieks and pulls his hand back, to no avail. The torturer still held it firmly between the blades.

"How did you come to Marley from Paradise Armin?" The bird asks again, his voice strictly calm.

His terrified brain gives up. "Hi-Hizuru." he confesses. "I sneaked to Hizuru and then kept on going like every other tourist."

The bird smiles encouragingly. "That's it! That's perfect Armin. See how you won't get hurt if you talk?"

Armin sighs in relief when the pruning shears go away from his fingers. But relief is short lived because his tired mind quickly catches up to what happened. It drowns him and chokes him on air.

He'd just... Revealed something. Something extremely critical to paradise!

How the hell are they going to communicate with the rest of the world if Marley cuts off Hizuru from them?

idiot.

monster.

stupid.

you just cornered your friends.

made them suffer. What are they going to do if Hizuru cuts all ties? If Marley punishes Hizuru for all this?

idiot.

monster.

idiot.

The bird doesn't seem to understand any of Armin's inner conflict. "Ok. Now tell me, how did paradise get rid of the pure titans in the area?"

Armin grinds his teeth, "No." he whispers.

"What did you say?"

Armin flinches away from the voice. "I said no, you're to keep asking more important questions if I keep answering you."

The bird's calm hands maneuver them into the same position again, the edge of the pruning shears against Armin's finger. "But Armin, that's the point. You need to answer them if you don't want to get hurt." he reminds him.

Instead of answering him. Armin shuts his mouth.

"Do you understand, Armin?"

Armin doesn't say anything.

He shuts his eye and bites back a whimper.

The bird doesn't ask again.

Cut .

It burns...

It burns...

IT BURNS!

The thrill of air on his open wounds is too much, the blood flow is too much, Armin's head is spinning, it's spinning endlessly and he can't feel it as the bird wraps out his hands after he's done cutting his fingers off and removes the neck piece on the chair for some reason.

Armin bites his tongue and bites back the tears gathered in his eyes. No. He won't give in to the sick sadistic man in front of him no matter how much he wants to.

Armin's eyes can't focus hard enough to follow him out. His head pangs against his scalp and he feels like a trapped animal.

He screams when the bird is out of his view.

He thrashes and screams at the top of his lungs, pulling and pushing himself back and forth. He has never wanted anything as much as he wants that light on the other side of the open door.

He screams and moves like a madman. His fingerless hands slip out easily from the ropes binding him to the chair. The chair falls to the ground, but his ankles don't get out. Armin fumbles fingerless with the ropes and resigns to chewing them out in the end until his ankles are free.

Armin stumbles to his feet. The limbs are two weeks after two days of being strapped to that chair.

Two days...

Armin scratches the thought. He pushes his feet forward, one step at a time. His eyes fixated on the light and the open door.

He has to reach it.

He *needs* to reach it.

Armin reaches for it with his hands, the sunlight on the concrete ground and the open door, he needs to feel it on his skin-- he needs to. And he's close. He's so close. he's moments away--

The door shuts closed.

What was light and freedom moments ago is shut away by a giant metallic door. And Armin's bandaged hands are left touching cold metal.

The room is pitch dark.

Armin's hand hover above the place that used to be light moments ago, clings to the memory with all his broken mind has until his fingerless palm touches the cold metal.

Armin gives up.

His feet buckle and he falls to his knees with a sob, clinging to the memory of the light with a dying man's desperate hands until he's laying on the ground, crying blood tears to unconsciousness.

On the other side of Liberio, Colt refuses to let go of Falco for one single moment when they are outside. The child doesn't like the new overprotectiveness of course, but he complies.

The only time Falco stops on their way home is to check the library, to see if Mr Oswin has returned.

When they were going to tell Liberio Oswin and Armin were the same person?

Colt doesn't need to wonder for long.

"What's happening over there?" Falco asks that day, staring wide eyed at the police ravaging through the shelves and books.

Colt holds his hand a little tighter. He pulls his brother after him, forcing him to walk faster. "Since when do we know what the police do?" he asks.

Falco shakes his head.

The next time the doors of his cell open and some light creeps in the pitch black cell, Armin unconsciously makes himself smaller and less noticeable. He doesn't want to go on that chair. He doesn't want to answer more questions.

He doesn't want to hurt.

He just wants it all to stop, is it so much to ask?

But then, Armin realizes with a striking clarity that it wasn't the bird's footsteps that he just heard.

Armin can't bring himself to sit up from the ground he hugs himself and tilts his head up.

Zeke looks down at Armin with pity.

Zeke Yeager

Armin's eyes widen, since when is Zeke a torturer? Does he even know it? He'll certainly be better than the bird but--

Zeke blows out a fit of smoke from his cigarette. "You know..." Zeke clears his throat, "I can put some good words with your... *torturers*."

Armin is hearing his voice from the other side of a tunnel. The words blur together and he isn't sure if he's hearing the other right, so he doesn't respond.

Zeke looks down. "I heard you've grown quite close with my mother. You're even dating my brother. Although, can't say I'm surprised." he says. "I bet both of them will be sad to see you like this."

Zeke kneels down. "I've heard you've already broken." Zeke shakes his head. "You've told them about Hizuru already" he shakes his head in disappointment. "What a shame. I thought Dina and Eren would pick someone stronger.

Armin shuts his eyes and bites back a whimper.

The worst part? Zeke was probably right.

"If you planned on talking more around Hizuru, Marleyan volunteers and my involvement, don't bother. no one will believe you." Zeke says as a matter of fact. "You'll just dig yourself a bigger grave."

Armin chuckles. "It looks to me like you're..." he gasps. "Scared of something."

Zeke kneels down completely. "I have nothing to lose, Armin. So the term curiosity killed the cat doesn't really apply to me."

What do you... Mean?

"You have yet to tell me where you got your purple eyes from." Zeke asks. "Come on. Not many can fool me but you did..."

Armin narrows his eyes. "I... Don't know what you mean?"

Armin doesn't understand what he means until Zeke's hand wraps around his throat and *squeezes* down, putting pressure directly on his windpipe.

Armin gasps and claws at the hand, trying to pull it back, but he has no fingers to grab Zeke's hand and pray it away. his body quickly starts to feel the effects of his restricted breathing. Armin wheezes again, trying to expand his lungs for air, his vision swims and he tries, desperately, to pull Zeke's hands off of him.

The only thing he can see is Zeke's eyes, the rest of his vision becomes blurred and dotted. Blood pounds in his head. His already

weak body can't fight suffocation for much longer. Tears bed at his eye and the veins in the injured eye pops, "ple-please--"

His ears ring loudly, a bell right next to his eardrums. Armin's head is about to explode.

"That won't work. Not with me, not with your torturers." Zeke says coldly and applies more force, Armin hears a crack. His body doesn't give up, he struggles and kicks but that only makes Zeke use his other hand to choke him too. His heart hammers rapidly in his chest, begging for mercy.

Slowly, Armin's brain gives up.

His eyes roll back, but the force on his neck doesn't go away until he can't feel anything anymore.

Armin doesn't even have it in himself to dramatically wake up.

He's too exhausted to even open his eyes.

But the moment he catches a glimpse of the night's star he knows where he is.

Zeke killed him.

And he did it intentionally.

"Hush, Angel, don't put so much pressure on your cut eye." a soft voice whispers, gentle hands rub under his eye. "I understand your situation, if I heal you fully, they'll just do it again. So I'll just resurrect you."

Armin's lips tremble. He bites them and nuzzles his face into the warm gentle hand caressing his face. He kisses it before resting his head on it, celebrating every caress he's allowed to have.

It makes him sob with relief.

"Your hair..."

Armin's hair feels greasy and less soft than normal, otherwise, there isn't a missing spot like he expected judging by the way Eren of the paths gasped. "What about it?" he mumbles.

Eren pushes his hair out of his face, grief settles on his eyes. "Your hair is graying..." he whispers, he pulls Armin closer until his lips touch his hair, a kind kiss. Armin rests his head against Eren's shoulder, a shivering sigh escapes his lips.

"Oh Armin..."

Armin sniffs like a child. "Can I stay here? Stay here until it's over? Please?" he begs, pushing his head deeper into Eren's neck. "*please* . I don't want to go back. They'll they'll--"

Eren touches the back of his neck, gently playing with the hair over there. "Hush, I'm sorry Angel. I know. I know. But I've kept you for too long. I can't keep you for much longer." he mumbles.

Eren's body shivers. The calm and confident facade slips away. The Eren of the paths hugs Armin as tightly as he can and buries his face in Armin's hair. "Armin stays strong. Please. Stay strong. I know you can do it."

Armin freezes.

He can already hear it. His connection to path servering. His time is running out. Soon he'll be back in that torture chamber, with the bird or zeke or anyone else that--

Eren pulls back. He cups Armin's face and stares at him in His eyes. "This was a stupid thing to do Armin." he says truthfully. "But remember why you did it. Remember why you're fighting."

Armin's eyes water.

No. No...

"Fight for it." Eren tells him. "Fight it my Angel. And I'll be here experiencing it with you every step of the way"

A blinding light captures Armin's eye before he can scream at Eren and beg him to stay.

This time, Armin slowly opens his eyes. His body already feels much better. Eren of the paths has no doubt healed some of his internal injuries.

But not his eyes.

Or the cuts on his face.

Or his fingers.

Armin bites his lip, a cheap way to stop the sudden tsunami of emotion when he looks at his bandaged, fingerless hands.

"Huh, look at this."

Armin tilts his eyes to the opposite wall, as he expected, Zeke is standing over there. He crushes the cigarette under his heel. "Looks like my hypothesis was right."

Armin rubs his sore neck, his chest struggling to expand and take in his precious air. He glares daggers in the other direction.

None of Zeke's emotions show on his face. He simply shakes his head. "Such a waste." he whispers. "I was hoping you could turn out to be a titan. Perhaps a royal like myself. But I have been proven wrong more times than I can hope anymore."

Zeke looks down, this time, his eyes filled with pity. "Who did you sacrifice?" he asks. "Never thought you'd be the one to make that deal."

Armin's blood freezes.

Zeke knows!?

Armin's heart bursts. It starts to beat rapidly, Armin forces himself to take deep enough breaths to calm it down. "I don't get what you mean?"

"Don't deny it, Arlert, I just saw it. You came back from the dead." Zeke kneels down, eye to eye with Armin again. "I've heard the stories. *A man with a heart's sacrifice can achieve immortality for a short period of time.* Ring a bell?"

Armin narrows his eyes. "No." he insists.

"Who sacrificed himself for you? A random eldian? A friend? I believe that's why you were sent. Because mother was sure you wouldn't die this way. Who was it? It certainly wasn't your own because you have a pulse." he insists. "I've heard the stories, Armin. This level of immunity needs a heart's sacrifice."

Armin swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobs up and down.

Either Zeke knows somehow, which is impossible, or he's talking about another ritual I don't know about.

"The Queen didn't... Didn't do anything." Armin whispers, the words come out barely audible.

"Oh, huh." Zeke hums. "I know, Dina has no idea such a ritual exists."

Armin's eyes widened. He took a sharp breath. *what!? That's impossible, Dina is the most knowledgeable person they've ever seen about titan--*

"Oh no, she's not, Mr. Ksaver was. And I carry his memories and my own research." Zeke says.

That's when Armin notices he's said that out loud.

Zeke shakes his head. "You're still an unknown variable, Arlert."

There is no way Zeke knows.

if Ymir has made the deal with anyone else in the past 2000 years, she must have been freed by now.

Armin hugs himself. Anxiety rushes to his brain. Nothing made sense anymore. Not from Zeke's explanations. To him killing Armin to prove something.

what is this? Some other part if the torture?

Zeke is thinking about another ritual entirely.

Armin looks up at the other, licking his lips as tasting the next words he wanted to say.

"You're wrong." Armin chuckles, he leans back against the wall as relaxed as possible and clicks his tongue. "You don't know anything. I didn't make any deals."

Zeke crushes another cigarette until his heel. "Keep telling yourself that. It might become reality." he says.

Zeke doesn't waste anymore time with him. He walks out and the doors close with a loud bang behind him, leaving Armin in the pitch dark black once again.

Armin curls into himself.

He hugs himself, buries his face in his knees and his mind shuts down.

home...

He thinks.

grandpa... Mikasa...

Eren...

A lone tear rolls down his face and falls into the cold hard ground.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 22:...

The story continues next chapter.

This chapter is left blank for personal reasons and the contents of it is a vent.

Dear future Sabrina,

I put the 22nd chapter of this fic empty for you, for reasons you know too well.

A small tribute, and all I can do, in this chaos I live in.

And I just have one ironic question. Are you free?

-With hope,

Your past self/ present Sabrina.

The world through his eyes.

Chapter 23: The world through his eyes.

Eren through the years. His motivation builds and builds until it all falls down.

Woops. Sorry for thr bomb I dropped at 22. I just broke a little inside. Anyway, this is the actual chapter, hope you enjoy!

As promised. Erens POV.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

What am I doing here?!?

Eren asks himself a lot. From the moment he transformed into his titan to the second his feet touched Liberio.

He was determined.

A few days ago he was determined to attack liberio during Willy Tyburs inevitable speech of victory. He was determined to meet up with Zeke and see what he had to say.

But the moment his eyes saw that newspaper article and recognised Armin's face, all of those plans were thrown away.

He's going all this for Armin. Him being captured was never a part of his plan.

Eren ran around Loberio, not knowing where or when he was going. He walks past the building, ignores the strange looks the people of Liberio give him.

It's not until he stops after searching the interment zone for a whole day, that he understands what's wrong with him.

"Your armband is on the wrong side, sir." said a small voice coming from below. It belonged to a blond boy with giant Olive eyes that searched him up and down.

Eren immediately takes off his armband and puts it on the other hand. "Sorry!" he whispers. "My name is Uh... Eren, uhm, Kruger?" Eren stutters. "I'm looking for my friend around here."

The boy's eyes immediately lit up. "Are you Mr Oswins friend?!"

Oswin!

Armin is likely to choose his grandpa's name as a decoy.

"Yes! Yes, I'm Oswins friend!" he says, kneeling down to be eye level with him. "Have you seen him? Is he around here?"

He was worried for no reason.

The guy just looked like Armin.

Eren has to be mistake--

The boy's eyes soften. "Oh..." he mumbles. "I think the police have arrested him. My brother gets mad whenever I talk about him and there's no... There's no official statement about his whereabouts--"

"FALCO!"

An older person suddenly shows up. He grabs Falcos hand and glares daggers at Eren. "Falco! What did I tell you about talking to strangers?" he says, pulling the preteen after him.

Falco looks back only once.

What he sees of Eren is someone frozen by regret.

Eren doesn't know how miles of steady water is between Liberio and paradise. He only knows the distance will take half a day by modern ships.

Swimming however...

There are more times in the past day that Eren wonders if he's swimming around in circles because all he sees is endless blue with no sign of land anywhere near him.

But he keeps swimming.

He needs answers more than he needs to rest.

He continues until his limbs are screaming for him to stop, until the tides become too tight against... Until He sees one of the scouting titans.

He almost passes out from relief.

The ugly pure titan stares at him from the rock he's sitting on. Or maybe... Maybe Eren had been actually seeing the scouting titans all along.

Are they precise enough to detect a single human too?

The sound of water splashing around makes Eren turn his titan head around. He looks towards the sound and sees something swimming towards him. It stops a safe distance away but then proceeds to swim to him.

It's near When Eren notices the jaw titans body. It stops an arm length away from Eren's titan and stares at him, grinding her teeth together in a usual threat.

There is no mistaking it.

It's Ymir's jaw titan.

She stays away and stares at Eren's titan eyes with her own. Her mouth opens. "You..." she says. "... Are an... Idiot..."

She offers a hand.

Eren sighs, steam rises from around him as he exits his titan body. Eren has no choice but to take her hand, his titan is already exhausted and he can't swim anymore without risking death. He reaches for Ymir's hands, the titan grabs him by his middle and puts him on her head.

"Hang on... If you... Wanna... Live..."

Eren grabs the strands of her titan hair and twists it around his hands to secure it further.

Ymir starts to swim back to the shores of paradise island.

Three years ago, Paradise,

At first, Eren hoped nothing would change with his friends.

He truly did.

It didn't help that even his mother teased him for his new title with. Even Shadis' careful facade cracked sometimes and he smiled.

He didn't like the extra court meetings he had to show up for with Historia, nor the fact that many recognised his face on the streets. But it was a 'necessary sacrifice' as Armin had put it. Because Dina wanted to keep the founding titan within the royal family and as far as she could from military commands.

Not that she was successful. Eren was still a member of the scouts.

Which meant he had to go back to his squad. A Lot has changed in a short time. Hange was now a commander, Eren a prince and Historia had decided to leave a soldier's life behind to run her orphanage.

Ymir was with him that day, both of them left the castle at the same time and rode on horseback in an awkward silence. None said a word until they were walking up the stairs and Hanges office could be seen.

Ymir reached for the door after a few moments of frozen silence. "So if you're not going to face it." she murmured and knocked, and opened the door immediately.

Eren stepped in after her, Ymir who immediately chose to lean against the nearest wall with her hands in her pockets.

Eren's eyes immediately found Armin's next to Hange's. He smiled, waving his hand as a welcome. Eren salutes to Hange and Levi before they nod. Eld and Petra are present too.

"Well, Well, look who's here!"

Jean's sudden voice takes his attention. He clicked his tongue. Sasha and Connie did a dramatic bow. "So gracious of Prince Eren himself to honor our humble presences." Connie said.

Sasha sighed and put her hand over her forehead. "Oh dear, how will we treat the prince to the best of our ability--"

"Knock it off." Eren said, but it came out awkward and embarrassed instead of demanding.

Connie smirked. "Whatever the prince so demands--"

"--As much as it's entertaining to see you brats bickering." Captain Levi said, his voice breaks through all the conversation. "We're here to assign you to your new duties."

Hopefully, Connie and Sasha dropped it.

"Well thank you, Levi." Hange clears their throat. "Alright, we're really shorthanded right now. Zeke's attack left the scouts with well... Just us. But in the past year, we've managed to fill most of vacant places." Hange crossed their hands behind their back. "We need to station soldiers near the shores until the garrisons take that responsibility. And the vacant places in Levi squad need to be filled."

Eld and Petra exchanged a silent look.

"For now the seven of you will remain as my squad for the foreseeable future, but I will have to attend to the regiment as a whole so I need to put a commanding officer or a captain for this squad in my absence," Hange clears their throat. "That'd be you, Jean. And then Armin. Only because Armin said he's too busy with Queen Dina."

Their eyes fell on Jean, and then Armin. Neither of them were surprised about this. Jean and Armin were being trained by Hange and Erwin themselves.

Although Eren didn't miss the way Jean tensed a little, his face morphed into a frown although his eyes stayed focused on Hange.

And Armin didn't miss it either.

Hange clapped their hands loudly, it snapped the group's attention back to them from their teammates. "Alright, Alright. Tonight. Eren and the queen will test one of my theories." Hange explained. "We need to see if the titans will still obey the founding titans will if they are not in the paths."

Connie raised his hand. "Ok, but what should we do? We haven't had expeditions and at this point we don't need to." he pointed out. "Shouldn't it be the garrison's job from now on?"

"Technically yes." Hange answered. "Although people have moved back to wall Maria, the exterior of it is still quite a mystery to us. We should ensure Marley doesn't bombard us with more titans before

we can give the thumbs up for people to move out. Chances of us running into titans is almost zero, though."

"... But if it does happen, we need to take care of it." Levi added. "Which is why we scouts should follow Eren and the queen in this expedition."

Ymir crossed her arms over her chest. "Just when I thought I was free from her stupid glare for a while..."

"Alright, everyone get ready. We'll head out soon." Hange told them, the squad saluted and left.

Dina was standing on their rendezvous point. If Eren concentrated hard enough, he could hear the sound of waves crashing against the shores. However, what got more of their attention was the three crystallized titans around them.

Eren jumped down from his horse, Hange gave them a nod and he got to work without a single word. Eren shook Dina's hand and both of their eyes immediately turned violet. The world around them turned to dust and sand and quickly morphed back into the material world.

One of the crystallized titans broke free and kneeled down next to them. Eren pushed his hands into his pockets at the same time his teammates pulled out their blades.

"Are you sure it's safe?" Mikasa asked, loudly.

Eren turned around, his green eyes turned violet. "Yeah..." he turned to Armin, the blond looking completely unphased. He smiled at him. "... We know, right?"

Armin rolled his eyes.

In Front of them, the titan bowed until his face was eye level with Dina. The queen sighed loudly, "Oh dear..." Dina whispered, she gently moved her hand over the titans forehead. "You poor soul..."

Eren watched with a hint of understanding. A part of his fathers memory quickly resurfaced everytime Eren thought about the pure titans trapped in their own shells outside of the walls.

"Please tell me I'm not the only one creeped out by that..." Sasha whispered, averting her eyes to the ground instead.

Eren's eyes softened. "Without context... It's kinda gross. But... I get it... He was shipped to paradise so..." he sighed. "That means he was a patriot."

Armin turned to the group. "Guys... The titan is probably Dina's friend at some point." Armin pointed out. "I think she deserves a little time to adjust..."

"I heard that." Dina said a little loudly. "I have never met this man in my life. Perhaps he was shipped before us." She patted the titans skin a few times and it stood up.

Another titans crystal broke. One after another, the nearer titans turned to flesh and bones once again.

"Then we'll go as planned." Hange said. "Order the titans to go into the waters. Levi's squad should test their reaction tonight."

"Do you guys really think Marley will come to throw titans at us again?" Sasha asked. "I mean... We know they have better ways with Zeke."

Armin answered her before Hange could. "We need to be prepared," he said. "Who knows? Maybe it's not Marley we'll find." he pointed towards the south. "Either way we need to make sure we know when and who comes to our shores. Now we need to--"

"--Queen Dina." Connie suddenly shouted. He was shocked after seeing the pure titans obey Dina's command with such ease that he didn't pay any mind to the conversation. He jumped between Jean and Sasha. "My Queen can you... Can you turn pure titans back into humans?" he asked loudly.

The group was shocked into silence. All eyes turned to Dina and the confused look in her eyes. "It's never been done." she admitted. "... Or I've never heard of it. But... Why do you ask, soldier?"

Connie looked at the ground, "My mother." he said. "He was turned into a titan by Zeke Yeager in his first attack... But... Her titan is still there in my hometown."

Dina looked over at Eren. The wheels behind her gray eyes started spinning. She offered a hand for Eren and he accepted it. He saw the hope bloom in Connie's eyes, so wide and so--

The paths turned to dust around them, Eren turned his head up and noticed he was in the same paths he ever was.

Dina wiped her hand in the air, Eren could feel the only pure titan in Ragako. He could see Connie's mother's titan in the back of his mind even though in front of him was plain white sand.

Dina sighed loudly. "We can't summon her presence." she shook her head. "Hate to be the bearer of bad news but..."

Eren arched an eyebrow. "You didn't even try--"

The paths dematerialized immediately. Eren lost his balance from the force of being kicked out of it. He grabbed his head and glared daggers at Dina's direction.

Dina instead, turns to Connie with a polite smile. "I can't. Not right now. But worry not," Dina assured him. "We will eventually find a way."

Eren's eyebrows twitched in annoyance. What happened?

It took a moment for his brain to click. Of course if Dina knew how to turn the titans back into humans she would have done so!

Eren narrowed his eyes on the woman.

... She doesn't know how.

Eren went to the castle the moment he was relieved from duty. He pushed the doors open without knocking. "Why didn't you tell me about this!" he shouted.

Dina gasped in surprise, she shut her book in reflex. "Eren!" she shouted back. "You startled me! Please knock next time! Where are your manners!?"

Dina opened her book again, her focus in the words written on the papers.

Eren narrowed his eyes, the guards closed the door behind him with a loud bang. "I was with you, back there in the paths. You didn't even try to turn his mother back into a human." Eren accused her. "... I sensed it."

Dina shut her book again, angrily this time. Her gray eyes focused on the cover. She sighed, standing up to her feet to face Eren. "I can't do something when I don't know how it's done, " she admitted. "You sensed that too, didn't you? There's no point in lying to you about something you already know."

Eren blinked in surprise, the realization felt like ice water on his nerves. He stared at Dina and her stone cold expressions that looked... Sad. Dina took her crown off of her head and held it in front of her, looking at her face reflected on the gold. "A Lot of the wisdom and knowledge of the kings is passed on to the founding titan

through royal blood. There is so much that can be passed mouth to mouth."

Dina looked up at Eren again.

"... That's impossible..." Eren whispered. "You know... *everything* ."

"I know a lot." Dina reminded him. "But even I... Have limits. That's why I have a court. That's why I ask for second opinions. A person can't be perfect but a group can."

Eren fisted his hands on his sides. "What else is there that I don't know?" he asked. "Or is it too much for your ego to talk about your weaknesses?"

Dina narrowed her eyes, she put her crown back on. "Don't underestimate me now. You've found only one flaw." she chuckled.

"I need to know if there's other things the founding titan can't do!" Eren yelled. "Forgive me for being shocked that the oh-so-powerful founding titan has weaknesses I didn't know of."

At that moment, there was a soft knock at the door. Eren and Dina glared at each other, neither willing to back down from the other's stare. Eventually, Dina shouted without taking her eyes off of Eren's: "Come in."

The doors opened soundlessly. "What is happening here?"

Eren turned around, Armin walked in slowly, looking at Eren and the queen both. "Are you... Ok?" he asked. "Eren... You stormed out of the headquarters to... Come and shout at the queen?"

Eren opened his mouth to say something but Dina beat him to it. "It's not easy co-managing the founding titan, Armin." She said, "Arguments were bound to happen. We don't..."

Eren felt it slowly.

His mind told him he was using his throat to scream, but he wasn't. He could feel an ache rising to his throat and mouth from screaming so loud, and yet, he hasn't said a word. He massaged his throat, looking at Dina from the corner of his eyes.

She had stopped talking as well.

"Can you... Feel it too?" Eren asked.

Dina nodded, she shut her eyes. "It's the scouting titans." she told them. "They've sensed something."

"Are you sure?" Armin asked. His blue eyes darted between them, anxiety setting in his eyes. Eren nods, there was a deeply unsettling feeling in his gut that he knew it wasn't just because of the titans signal.

"This ought to be serious." Dina murmured quietly. "Armin, Eren, go check. The scouts must be in the scene by the time you get there." she ordered. "And Eren, if it's serious. Leave the scene and come here. You know we'll need the founding titan more than the attack titan if the situation calls for it."

Eren's eyes narrowed. He didn't answer and just saluted as he ran after Armin.

Armin stayed silent and lost in his own thoughts on the entire way to the shores.

They got there just in time to see Hange negotiating with one of the ships on the shores. And saw the woman who killed her superior. "Hange." the giant woman said. "I'll accept your tea, what a lovely offer."

Eren didn't miss the way Armin flinched. His violet eyes narrowed suspiciously at the woman and his hands fisted so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Armin's instincts were never wrong. Eren already despised her.

Eren wasn't there when Hange and Levi initially talked with Yelena and Onyankopon. He had stayed with his squad and argued with Ymir.

Armin's silence went completely over his head.

When he noticed that Yelena and the Marleyan warriors were sent from Zeke Yeager, he knew the fragile peace and routine he had built with Dina was moments away from crashing.

He asked Hange what Zeke had offered, and Hange said everyone will hear it when it's being read in the court.

In the court meeting, Dina kept herself perfectly composed as Hange and Levi recited the reports for her in front of the court and other parts of the military. She nodded a few times and read the list of so-called Marleyan volunteers names and occupation carefully.

Eren sat on his spot with the rest of the high ranking scouts. He would never admit it out loud but the topic was starting to bore him.

(Ymir as well. The two titans had very little to offer to the discussions at hand. Ymir filled in the void by often rolling her eyes and having silent conversations with Historia, who was sitting next to Dina)

Hange lowered the paper. "... And that is all we know about them." Hange concluded. "To summarize. There are a number of people gathered by Zeke Yeager who are willing to help paradise advance in order to solidify its place against Marley."

"That's absurd!" one of the military police yelled. "Zeke Yeager is the one who slaughtered the people of Ragako. He's responsible for so many deaths and the destruction of Trost. You can't expect us to trust a--"

"Be mindful of the words you speak, commander." Dina said loudly, slamming her hand to the table. The sound of it echoed in the room. She narrowed her eyes at the man, "Zeke may be in Marley but he's still an Eldian royal, and he's *my son* ."

The threat was enough on its own. Dina closes the case and looks at Hange. "What do you believe, commander Hange?" she asks. "Are they armed? Come with gifts? or have attacked you?"

Dina closed her eyes and took a deep breath. If Eren didn't know any better he would say Dina was *excited* .

"Do you trust them?"

Hange kept themselves emotionless. They put the reports on the table and looked at the rest of the commanders and court members present. "Zeke Yeager himself is responsible for why the scouts were in critical condition for a year. For so many deaths."

Dina arched an eyebrow. "But...?"

"This specific group has come unarmed." Hange confirmed. "And currently, they are the only chance we have at even getting relatively close to the years we've lost because of our battle with the titans."

Dina smiled. "Well, that's a selling point. I will vote for us to trust them though... `` She cleared her throat. "Leaving them in the capable hands of the scouts is technically our only chance right now."

She leaned forward, the subject of her attention solely Hange. "Do you accept this responsibility?"

Hange nodded. Their faces are perfectly neutral.

"That's perfect." Dina said, she held her hand up. "I believe we can reach an agreement. Anyone have anything to add?"

not with that tone of yours they don't . Eren thinks to himself.

Dina looks at Historia on her right. The princess clears her throat and nods. She stands up, her turn to speak. "Although I agree with what you said, commander Hange. There's always the threat of them betraying you... This begs the question of what plans do you have with the volunteers that's worth taking this risk?"

Armin chuckled. He leaned back on his chair and slightly to his right. "She's training her." he whispered quietly enough that only Eren could hear.

Eren rolled his eyes. "Wow, such good training."

"Believe me, Eren, it's better than just throwing her into the mess of the crown suddenly." Armin whispered.

For the first time Hange cracked a smirk. "Going into unknown territory for the better is what a scout does." she reminded the court. "As I said, the scouts will cooperate with the volunteers. As our sole way to develop, they are a good chance to take. If we ever truly want to develop. We need to meet the first conditions Zeke Yeager has laid..."

Hange took a deep breath.

"... And then we'll see what his second conditions are."

Dina nodded. "That's enough for me. All those in favor of leaving the matter of the volunteers to the scouts?"

The court was filled with half hearted "Aye" sounds from the rest of the military.

"Zeke has changed his mind!"

Dina was close to tears in the privacy of the empty throne room with only Eren and Historia present. She hid the lower half of her face

with her hands, shutting her eyes and batting away the unshed tears. "Zeke-- Zeke changed his mind, Eren!"

Eren and Historia exchanged a confused look. Historia bit her lip and said: "Uhm, ok but-- I'm still a little about the degree you're letting his men work..."

Dina folded the letter from Zeke Yeager, then put it carefully in a jeweled box like her most prized possession. "He'll be back soon. And he even has allies that'll help paradise advance again." she said, not caring about

Historia tried again. She took a step closer to her throne. "That's great, Dina but--"

"we'll meet them soon!" Dina whispered with a smile. "The Hizurans! I didn't know Azumabito still cared. But as soon as the port is finished they'll--"

"Hello? Can you hear us?" Eren said, interrupting her. "I know he's your son. I know you want him to change... But should we really trust someone who tried to euthanize us all?"

Dina shook her head. "If his end goal is ending the eldian race, it would have done more good if he didn't do anything. Don't you think so?" she asked. "Without proper action, Paradise will eventually fall to Marley. If not this attack then the next."

Dina stood up, Eren and Historias words finally making their effect on her enthusiasm. "I... Need more time to rest. You two are dismissed."

Eren pushed his hands into the pockets of his long black coat. He turned around without once looking back. Historia followed him out. The doors of the throne room snapped shut.

Eren sighed loudly, annoyed. "Please tell me it makes you worry too." Eren whispered as they walked out.

Historia nodded. "Dina believed Zeke's words unbelievably fast and she's giving his minions all they asked..." Historia repeats exactly the words Eren was thinking.

Eren rubbed his forehead. "Zeke is Dina's weak spot. Last time, it was all just a miracle that stopped her from making us all go extinct." Eren says as a matter of fact. "And it's-- we're not safe. We will never be safe like this."

"Well, Zeke's plan isn't all that bad."

"Historia, are you seriously considering even *thinking* about Zeke's plan?"

Soft footsteps interrupt their conversation. Eren doesn't hear it so he continues. "It's good we have outside help but if they're even remotely related to Zeke, they WILL stab us in our backs." he says confidently.

A soft laugh reached his ears.

"Well, glad to hear you think like that."

Eren turned around, his face turned pale slightly. In front of him, Armin put his hands on his hips. "So?" he asked. "Keep going. I wasn't even listening."

Eren raised his hands in defeat. "I uh... Fine... I know you and Hange have grown close to the volunteers and all but..."

Armin shook his head. "Come on, that doesn't mean I don't have my own doubts." he added. "I uh... Wanted to know your opinion about them." Armin said simply. "Have they... By any chance... Contact you privately?"

The question struck Eren. He looked at Historia from the corner of his eyes before shaking his head. "No..." he said truthfully. "Should they?"

Armin shrugged. "Considering Zeke's obsession with you. Yeah, they probably will at some point." Armin waved goodbye. "Sorry, I just came here to check up on you. I have another meeting with the engineers, see you!"

Armin took a step back, and then another. And then another. He slowly turned around and disappeared.

Historia laughed. She hit Eren's shoulder and said: "he's stalking you!"

Eren looked at her with disgust over his eyes. "No, he's not. Why would he stalk me?"

"Seriously?" Historia asked. "Doesn't it make you wonder why he shows up suddenly during crucial moments?"

Eren rolled his eyes and brushed it off.

Dina accepted what the Hizurans read.

That was the last straw in Eren's already unstable temperament.

He didn't even wait for the Hizurans to finish reading when he slammed his hands to the table, it shook the table and took the attention of all those around it.

He didn't care that Mikasa was here. He didn't care that she was so happy to finally see people like her (Even if she never showed it). What they read made his blood boil.

... And then, the royal would have to produce as many heirs as they can to keep the practice of titan inheritance.

"No!" he yelled again, glaring at Lady Azumabito. "I won't accept this- - this-- this is breeding people like livestock!"

"This isn't your choice to make, Eren." Dina said. Eren couldn't believe his eyes, at how pathetic she was.

"Do-- you're not reading a newspaper, you know?" He snapped.

Dina puts the papers away. "Again, this isn't your choice."

"It's not your choice either, you old hag!" Ymir shouted, standing up too. Her accusing finger at Dina's direction. "Don't pretend this is about you! Cuz it's not! And you know it!"

Ymir's words strike silence into the room. Eren, Dina and the Azumabitos' eyes slowly shift to Historia.

She was calmly reading the proposal, but Eren knew her well enough to know the subtle signs. She bit the inside of her lips and slowly slid the paper back towards the Hizurans. "This can not be the only way." she said.

Some of the tension visibly left Ymir's shoulder. She threw herself back on her chair. "There!" She said. "You have it."

A few beats of unbearable silence passed. Armin stood up from his seat and smiled politely at Azumabito. "I believe we need to postpone this meeting, " he said. "Mikasa... Jean... Why don't we keep the Azumabito company while the commander and the others sort this out?"

Mikasa and Jean nod immediately. They lead the Azumabito out. When they were alone, Dina excused Ymir and the rest of the scouts as well, saying the matter was a family only.

Which only poured fuel on Eren's already burning rage and his doubt at Dina's abilities.

No matter how hard Eren tried to keep himself from raising his voice. It quickly broke into a shouting match.

"It's not just your own life you're risking!" Eren yelled, pointing a hand at the door. "Do you have any idea what situation you're in?"

Historia kept herself neutral, watching Eren and Dina's fight without a clear intent.

"Well, *she* is right here. She'll say something if she's against it!" Dina yelled back.

"Why can't you see it, Dina, ZEKE IS USING YOU!" Eren yelled at the top of his lungs. "He's doing exactly what Marley would have! He has a grander plan in mind-- just-- just think about it for a moment."

"You don't know zeke! You can't accuse him like that!"

"He wants all of us to go extinct!"

"He has changed his ways!"

"He hasn't!" Eren threw his hands in the air. "I saw my father's memories! I want to wipe my mind from all those bloody memories but I can't and you know what I see?!? I see your precious son and I KNOW. I know how he gave you away to the Marleyan and I SEE HOW HE WILL DO IT AGAIN--"

"OUT!" Dina yelled, pointing her hand at the door. "GET OUT, Eren. I don't want to see you until you get this temper out! Is that how you talk to your superiors?"

Eren ground his teeth together. "No." he admitted. "... Because my superiors are actually respectable human beings." he turned around and stormed out of the throne room.

He marched out, angrily. He failed to see Armin walking on the other side of the hallway.

"Eren?" he asked as Eren walked past him. Armin stumbled to catch up. "Please... Once... I just want to walk into this room and not see you two arguing for once." Armin mumbled. "Eren, stop-- come on."

Armin grabbed him by his elbows and made Eren stop. Eren grinded his teeth and pulled his hair back. "Armin-- I-- weren't you with the Azumabito?" he asked.

Armin held him still by his elbows. "I was." he said sincerely, his violet eyes met Eren's. "But I thought I should check on you because I knew you'd act emotionally."

Eren frowned, his face started to hurt from it. "Armin are you... Taking her side?" Eren said, his eyes dangerously narrowed.

"There are no sides to take. We're all here in Paradise and what's for our benefit. And whatever I need to make sure no one ever thinks about activating the rumbling." Armin said. "I think we all need to take a moment to breathe."

Eren clicked his tongue.

But Eren didn't let him go. His hand moved from His elbows and held the other hand. "Eren, look at me." Armin said, gently moving his thumb over Eren's knuckles. "What happened to you there?"

Eren sighed. "I... I don't know... I..." he swallowed hard. "I can't accept this Armin, I can't... I..."

"Neither can I."

Armin's confession caught him off guard. The blonde looked back at the throne room door. "Dina will grow out of it eventually. If I tell you I have a plan to contact the rest of the world and stop an inevitable war, will you believe me?" Armin asked.

Eren blinked in surprise.

"I..."

Armin was one of the strongest and smartest people Eren knew. What made him so fantastic in his eyes, made him terrifying for an unfortunate soul that made Armin their enemy.

Eren knew it.

He smiled. "And you're going to tell me this plan of yours?"

Armin chuckled. "Sure. I need your help with it actually." he pointed out. "So... Do you trust me? Do you promise to say whatever future knowledge you get to me?"

Eren nodded.

"I promise."

"You want me to WHAT?"

Armin took a deep breath. "I know it's sudden, and I know it's a lot to ask but..." he took another step in Mikasa's direction. "Can you do this? I don't want to pressure you into doing anything but it would do us great help if we had more stable relationships with Hizuru."

Mikasa pointed at herself. "And you want me to... What exactly?"

Armin opened his arms like a hug. "If you accept it. It's nothing. I just want you to show yourself to the elders of the Azumabito. It's harder to ignore us when they've seen us, you see."

Mikasa arched an eyebrow. "And if I say no?"

"I'll be frank. Then we'll have to give everything up to change and hope they'll be generous enough to actually help us." Armin said, looking directly at Mikasa's eyes. "But I'm sure you know by this point... They're not very kind unless you force them to or threaten their public image."

Mikasa put her hands on her hips, looking more and more confused and irritated by the second.

"So?" Armin asked. "Do you trust me?"

If Eren was asked about his biggest fears, he would scuff and proudly say he was not afraid of anything. A bigger lie couldn't be told, everyone in Eren's circle of trusted people know he's afraid of many things, one of them that latches into his subconscious and eats away at his dreams.

And that's the death of his loved ones.

Someone on his line of work should be used to it, right? Gunther, Olou, Miche squad, Hange squad. Even Berthold and Annie.

And yet the thought that death was still lurking in the shadows, not in the form of a titan but very much a man holding a gun and far... far more advanced technologies than Eren ever dreamt of.

It's a fear he knows his father lacked. He has the old man's memories, has experienced what he experienced and sensed what he sensed and none of them were the paralyzing fear Eren felt when he thought about how close his mother was to death in the attack on Shiganshina.

Or how Mikasa is fighting right next to him in the front lines of an inevitable battle.

Or the fact that Armin--

Eren stopped.

He needed to stop thinking so hard about everything. Everyone was going to die at some point. And right now, they have more chances of survival than they ever did. Eren never wants to have to experience the grief of their loss while he's alive.

With the bigger picture painted for him vividly in his mind by his father's memories, Eren knew he should appreciate this peace. This little time he had left with his loved ones.

"Eren--"

So Eren tried, he tried to stop thinking hard about it. Politics was never his thing and Dina was capable enough on her own to deal with Marley on the grand level. Eren was content to keep his role as a soldier as long as he was sure their freedom was being protected by the government.

"... Eren, can you help mother with setting the table?"

Eren tried to bring himself to the present. To feel the touch of the wood under his fingertips and the dishes he was supposed to be carrying to the living room. He pushes the image of his mothers house deep into his mind and tries to enjoy the welcome scent of it.

"Eren?"

Eren shook his head. He nodded at Mikasa, who had a large bag of flour on her back and carried it, apparently, to the kitchen.

He was pulled back to reality by his mothers gentle touch. "Eren?" she asked. "Are you ok?"

Armin said he'll fix things... But...

Carlas smile turned soft. "Is this about Keith again? We'll be married by next week, Eren." Carla reminded him. "... So please just talk and see if you can work things out with your step father?"

Eren elbowed her. "You still have the chance to back out." he says back. "Believe me, this man is nothing good to live with."

Carla smiled softly. She hit the boy's head softly with her rolled newspaper. "Joke about something else..." she added with a smile. "Listen, this is the last meal we can have as a family before Mikasa will leave for Hizuru so please... Eren..."

Eren carried the plates to the table and helped his mother set it. Keith arrived with the food and the air between them immediately turned tense.

After the table was set, they sat down. Even the tasty smell of the food couldn't stop Eren and Mikasa from glaring at their old commandant and new step-father.

"No scout business and no *Hizuru*..." Carla said before any of them could say one word. She looked at Mikasa from the corner of her eyes. "... On this table. We're just going to have a nice family dinner while we can. Ok?"

"Yup." Eren said, emphasis on the P. Mikasa and Keith only nodded silently.

Eren walked Mikasa out of their home and then followed her to the port where lady Kyomi was waiting for her. She was overjoyed that she was finally taking the long lost heir home.

And Mikasa repeated, every time, that she was only going to stay for two weeks. Eren said his goodbyes and waved as he walked away. He had to return to train his titan with Ymir and he would have, if he didn't catch the shadow of someone entering the port moments after he left it.

Curious and anxious, Eren ran back inside. He caught a glimpse of Jean talking to Mikasa next to... Another suitcase? Eren had just enough of a mind to hide behind a corner. He pressed his ears to the wall and listened to what they were saying in the open space of the port.

"Hange said Someone should come with you." Jean recalled. "And I volunteered. You can say no, of course, but do you really trust... Them... To go alone?"

"I don't. But I have to go." Mikasa said. "Armin is right. This needs to be done if we want Hizuru to take us seriously."

Armin!?

If anyone should follow Mikasa it's me and Armin. What is horseface going to do if there's real danger anyway!?!

Eren wanted to make himself known but a sudden grip on his elbow stopped him. He knew the gentle but unyielding hand on his elbow from memory. "Armin!?" he whispered. "Why are you here?"

On the other hand, Mikasa shrugged. "You can come." she said. "But I don't guarantee anything that'll happen in Hizuru."

Eren's eyes widened into two circles.

"Eren!" Armin whisper-yelled. His eyes frowned angrily and kept Eren back with all his might. "You heard Mikasa's answer!"

Eren scuffed. "This is ridiculous! Mikasa can protect herself all by herself- it's just two weeks and wasn't this supposed to be a show of trust between Hizuru and paradise I--"

Armin pulled him back into a corner. "Since when are you political?" he sighed. "Look... Let her handle this ok? If she didn't want Jean there, she wouldn't have let him."

Eren arched an eyebrow. "Why are you here, by the way?" he asked.

Armin made a questioning face. "Following you, of course," he said. He pointed at the air. "I have to help my grandpa with his bookshop today. Come with me, it'll take your mind off of things."

So Armin took his hand and pulled him all the way to Stohess. To a corner in his grandfather's bookshop. The old man just smiled at them and showed them the last book series that was restored from the MPs illegal book list since what the people call "liberation of the walls".

Armin picked one and pulled Eren down to sit on the ground as he read it outloud. Little by little, as the sun started to set, Eren enjoyed

it too. Felt warm and happy as he listened to Armin read his book with the voice Eren can only describe as angelic.

Before he knew it. Armin closed the book. "Wow..." Armin murmured, leaning his head against the wall behind them. "That was fun! It had good twists and... Eren... Eren did you listen?"

Eren nodded.

"Oh really? Then tell me why did they try to set a false fire alarm in that woman's house?"

Eren arched an eyebrow. "I admit I didn't pay attention all the time but I think it was because they wanted her to save what she held dear the most." Eren shrugged. "Which was the evidence they were looking for?"

Armin smiled, impressed. "Wow. You 're actually listening."

"Right. But if it happens..." Eren pulled him closer to his side. "You're the first thing I'll grab and run," he tells the blond. He pressed a kiss to the top of his head as Armin rolled his eyes.

"I'm flattered." the other said. "But we really need to work on your ability to read more complex stories"

Much like how Armin told him a little shy than a hundred times, Yelena eventually contacted him.

A piece of paper, given to him by her guard. It gave a simple instruction of a time and place.

Against his better judgment, Eren showed up to the meeting. He walked into the abandoned castle and pulled his hoodie back when he saw the giant woman.

"What do you want, Yelena?" Eren asked. His eyes drifted to the image of the full moon on the window behind her. He had to return to the headquarters soon or else someone would notice he's gone. "I don't have much time."

Yelena nodded. "And I won't take much of it. I'm here to talk about an offer Zeke Yeager has made specifically for you."

Eren's eyes narrowed. "This is a trap. I'm not *that* blind ." he said. "If there's anything Zeke needs to tell me you can say it to the whole court. I'm not going to be accused of treason." Eren turned on his heel to leave but Yelena's next words shook him to his core.

"It's About Armin Arlert."

Eren stopped, he looked at the woman from the corner of his eyes, unadulterated rage dropped from his green eyes. "Don't--" he hissed. "Don't say his name!"

"I can't not." Yelena said. "I'm sure you noticed something must be wrong with that boy."

"Nothing is wrong with Armin!"

"I'm sure you've understood by now that Armin Arlert isn't a normal eldian."

Eren chuckled. Can this woman be more obvious? "Yeah, he's a genius. Observant, quite and calmest and best strategist--"

"I didn't mean his brains. Surely you've noticed the violet eyes. How many other people with violet eyes have you seen that didn't carry the founder?" Yelena asks. "... You know he wasn't born with them."

Eren fists his hands in his pocket. "Yeah? What of it?"

"You Know purple eyes are a good indicator of having the heart of the founder. Everything about this boy means he travels regularly to the paths." Yelena offers. "But he's not the founder. You are."

"Where are you going with this?"

Yelena opened her hands, in a gesture that can be easily mistaken by a warm welcome. "But Zeke Yeager needs to warn you about it since you're his dear brother--"

"Say it." Eren growled.

Yelena's eyes turned serious. "Zeke Yeager believes that your beloved has made a mistake. A grave mistake many people have made in history."

Eren grinded his teeth. What was she talking about? Was she just mixing the truths? Using that to manipulate truth into something that benefits her and Zeke?

But... Nothing else had been able to explain the shift in Armin's eyes color.

Yelena opened her mouth, it spread to a smile as she talked. "Zeke Yeager believes Armin Arlert has made-- or has been forced to make a deal with the devil. A deal with founder Ymir herself. Having purple eyes is the most obvious giveaway that he's gone to paths. And that he's survived unbelievable things!"

Eren narrowed his eyes.

She's lying.

She's lying.

"And a deal with Ymir Fritz is most common when the king made a deal with her to make sure his ambassador or someone of high importance gained immortality for a short period of time." Yelena explained. "Have you noticed? How can Armin Arlert survive anything thrown in his way?"

"You're bluffing." Eren said as a matter of fact. "Armin didn't even know Ymir Fritz existed when his eyes started changing colors."

"The circumstances are unclear. I admit but the evidence all points in his direction." Yelena said. "Do you know what happens after the deal expires?"

Eren rolled his eyes. "What?"

"Arlets heart will stop. And he will die." Yelena said slowly, waiting for each word to settle in Eren's mind.

The world slowly lost its importance, Eren felt light headed. He turned around, running his hands through his hair before meeting Yelena with a heated glare. "You're bluffing! If such a thing existed Dina would have told me!"

"Dina doesn't know. She also doesn't know how to revoke a deal made with Ymir Fritz herself. But Zeke does." Yelena said.

Eren growled. He put his hoodie back on. "You're bluffing," he said. "And I'm sure Hange wouldn't like you sabotaging them."

For the second time that night, Yelena's words stopped him from walking away.

"If you want your partner's heart to stop. Then by all means, walk out of that door."

Eren stopped immediately.

He glanced back at the mad woman, his jade green eyes narrowing dangerously.

Yelena looked unphased. "Because it'll happen. One way or another. Armin Arlets deal with Ymir Fritz, whatever it is, will expire. And that's the day he will take his last breath."

Yelena took another step in Eren's direction.

"And Zeke Yeager...."

One step closer.

"... Is your only hope..."

A devilish smile.

"... Do I have your undivided attention?"

Eren ran back to the headquarters. His lungs burnt and his muscles ached by the time he reached the dorms but he didn't stop. He let muscle memory take him to Armin's room.

He didn't care that it was the middle of the night. He banged on the door. "Armin!" he shouted at the wood. "Please, Armin, open the door. Open this door."

Eren banged on the door, until he stopped. He rested his forehead on the wood and let out a shaky breath. Armin might not be here. He might be with his grandpa. He might be...

He might be...

The door suddenly creaked. Eren jumped back as the door opened, revealing a barely awake Armin. "Eren?" he mumbled, voice clearly surprised. His hair in a shivered bed head on his head and his eyes a dark red.

Eren lost his control over his actions. He pushed Armin into the room and shut the door.

His hands trembled as he reached for the blonde. He held the back of his head and tilted it, he leaned down and kissed his lips, roughly. Unbearable need consumed him, the need to feel the other's warmth under his skin.

Armin sighed into the kiss, his hands reached up and wrapped around Eren's neck. He tilted his head and deepened the kiss.

Eren pushed the other until the back of the blonds knees hit his bed and he fell unceremoniously into the sheet. A stunned sound escaped his lips. "Eren what's--" he tried to sit up but Eren quickly overpowered him, he pushed him back to lay on the sheets with one hand, securing him.

Armin's giant eyes stared up, a hint of fear in the vast violet color.

Violet.

No blue.

Never blue these days.

But it's supposed to be blue.

Eren ignored it. He had more important things to check. He held Armin down by his shoulders and pressed his ear against his chest, slightly to the left.

please, be there.

Please let her be wrong--

Eren gasped in exhalation, his tense body relaxed immediately upon hearing the fast but steady heartbeat under Armin's chest.

His body went boneless over Armin's. His fingers just played with the others' hair.

"Eren?" Armin's soft voice asked. "Is something wrong?"

Eren shook his head. "Nothing. Just a nightmare. I uh... I had to make sure you're alright." he murmured. He moved up and pressed a small kiss to the blond's forehead. "Sorry I woke you up and I--"

Eren swallowed hard.

Eren shut his eyes, then opened them, his eyes screaming like new determination. "Let me court you, Like Historia is courting Ymir." he said, his voice shattering the silence more than any scream would.

Armin's eyes suddenly widened. He pulled back, an eyebrow raised. "Are you... Ok? You're acting pretty strange." he whispered.

Eren just pushed the blonde's head back under his neck. "I just want you close," he admitted. "You can come with me to Stohess when we're off duty too. A room in the castle like Ymir and-- close. You'll be close."

Armin laughed a little. "I'm always in the castle Eren... I'm the Queen's advisor, did you forget?"

Eren bit his lip. No, he hasn't.

"Speaking of--"

"I'll talk to Dina. I'll convince her." Eren assured him. "I don't care about the circumstances... Please just... Just move in somewhere I can protect you."

Eren rested his forehead on Armin's shoulder. "Please..." he said, his voice coming out muffled. "Please... I... Your life is being threatened."

That got Armin's attention. "My life? Who would threaten my life?"

Eren shook his head. "It doesn't matter." he murmured. "Just a stupid dream. Can I... Can I stay here tonight?"

Armin opened his arms, so Eren could sink in his embrace. "Of course." Armin whispered, his hand wrapped around his body and moved in small comforting circles across his back.

"Whatever it is... I'm here for now. You can trust me with it."

I'm here for now.

... For now.

Eren pulled back. "Don't talk like that! You're going to have a long fulfilling life!" he yelled in the blond's face. "You're going to-- you're going to--"

Armin hushed him gently. He cupped his face and ran his thumbs across the other cheek. "Eren..." he whispered. "We're all going to die at some point."

Eren put his hand over Armin's, he kissed the back of Armin's hands, then laid down next to him. "You won't." Eren said, "You won't..."

Armin didn't say one more word the entire night.

He's next to the ocean again.

His feet are soaked, and so is his shirt. His hand is too, but the warmth of others fingers laced with his own keeps him warm.

Eren looks at his right, Armin stares out at the view. A little older, A little wiser, but with the same spark of excitement and... Fear?

"I can't believe this..." Armin whispers, he lets go of Eren's hand to hug himself tightly. "The sun is setting. The sun is setting. It's the third day of fall. 854. Third day of fall, 854."

Eren reaches for the blond, he pulls him into a hug and rests his head over his chest, letting the other to lean against him. "Armin, calm down. It's going to be ok."

Armin's hands latch into his body, grips his coat and buries his face into his chest. "It's not." His voice has a calmness that his body doesn't. "It won't. It's the third day of fall and I..."

Armin freezes in his arms.

Then, his hands pull harder at Eren's much larger body. "Eren, I don't want to go." Armin whispers, his fingers clutch to the back of Eren's shirt.

"You won't." Eren whispers in his hair. "You won't. You'll stay alive. And you'll live very very long. And when you die, you'll have a thousand wrinkles on your face and your hands will be shaking from old age."

Armin's lips quiver. "Eren..."

He pulls back, now, there is a bitter smile over his face.

"This is not something you can fight. "

Eren opened his eyes slowly.

He sat up and massaged his eyes. This dream again. He wasn't sure if it was a dream or future reality at this point.

He left the bed. He made sure Armin stayed sleeping as he stood up. He looked at him, he let his mind memorize every little detail about Armin's sleep. The peace in his body, the calm in the simple rise and fall of his chest.

Eren walked to the bathroom. He opened the sink and let the water run as much as it could. He splashed his face with water, again again again.

Maybe then, things would make sense again.

Maybe then, Dina would become the logical and all-knowing queen. Maybe she wouldn't be blinded by her love for her son.

Maybe then, Armin's actions would make sense again.

Maybe Yelenas would.

Maybe then, he could trust any of them with this new information.

Zeke was right. ..

Eren stared at his own reflection in the mirror, cursing himself for being so stupid. Armin survived a blast, a gunshot to his chest, the armored attack, being eaten alive and Zeke's rock attacks!

There was no way normal humans would survive so many life-threatening situations without so much as a scar.

... Not without being boosted by the power of the titans.

Eren looked down at the sink.

Zeke was right.

Both about Armin being special.

and about Dina not being able to help.

only he can help.

Eren looked up at his own reflection again, determined once again.

I have to meet up with him.

Present, Paradise island,

Eren jumped down from Ymir's titan.

Ymir lands near the port and the moment her feet touch the ground, she transforms. In the middle of the steam, Eren can see four people running to them.

"Ymir!" comes Jean's voice. Jean's eyes fall on Eren's as he tries to stand up again. "Is it really... You..."

Mikasa steps closer, her gray eyes glare daggers at Eren. "He is." she says. "You're... Finally back."

Connie and Sasha appear last, but their presence makes nothing better.

Sasha is the only one to offer a smile, albeit awkward.

"Welcome back!"

And her voice echoes in the silent port.

Poor Eren has no idea 3rd day of fall is less than a year away now...

A guest in Hizuru

Chapter 24: A guest in Hizuru

My my here I am again! With another chapter!

WARNIING

Heart attack, mentions of torture coma and death.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Some time ago,

Armin appeared in her room, one friday afternoon. After the Azumabito gave Zeke's proposal and before Hizuru outright refused to be the bridge between Paradise and the rest of the world.

Mikasa was expecting him.

"What exactly do you want me to do, Armin?" Mikasa asked.

Armin sat down on the other side of the table, a globe in front of him. Armin slid it closer to Mikasa and pointed at a small island in the corner of a much bigger continent.

"This is us. Paradise island." he says, tapping his hand over it. "In modern times it's not really all that important but--" Armin hovered his hand over the bigger continent. "This is Marley. A fertile land with perfect weather. the more North you go, the colder it gets but that's not important. Then we go all the south to the rest of the world." Armin pointed at the other lands on the southern part of the globe. "This dessert happens to be the gap between Marley and the rest of

the continents, therefore people often prefer to travel by sea. A popular destination to rest and restock between sea travels is..." Armin tried off, putting his hand on the island between the two continents, slightly to the east.

"Hizuru..." Mikasa completed. "That explains why they're such skilled business people."

Armin nodded. "Their essence and survival is based on trading and business. Which is also why the Azumabito are known for being money grabbing vixens. And exactly why they were such close Allies with Eldia." he said. "After Eldias fall it did little to shift the balance. Money is the only language all ethnicities understand, so Marley wasn't willing to lose Hizurus assistance. So they just played along."

Armin rubbed his chin. "Although my guess is... If the Azumabito lost their king and leader they surely have much less power now than they had a hundred years back. My other guess is that Maybe leadership is considered a hereditary trait. Like blue blood. And the Azumabiti insist on getting you back home simply because they think you can replace the honor or status they lost simply by existing. A leaderless clan isn't stable enough to gain much, after all." Armin cleared his throat. "In other words, the Azumabito are going to show you to A LOT of people in Hizuru and leave out the part that you're an Eldian."

Mikasa hummed thoughtfully. "I don't want to get myself involved in this mess." She rubbed the Azumabito mark on her wrist.

After a moment of heavy silence, Armin's eyes softened. "I remember how much you wanted to learn more about your mother's tribe when we were little." he whispered, "This wasn't what you were thinking of, right?"

Mikasa didn't answer.

Hesitantly, Armin put his hand over Mikasa's. "I know you don't want to. But we need you to do this for more reasons than just getting to

know your mother. You need to do this for us. For Eren, especially."

Mikasa arched an eyebrow. "Eren?"

Armin nodded, his eyes downcast. "I have a feeling Mikasa. You know Eren, he'll go headfirst into danger and leave us in the dust. What if he goes to fight the Marleyans? We need to stop him from making a mistake he can't fix. And we can't do it if Paradise is isolated from the rest of the world."

Armin met Mikasa's eyes again, she doubted the unshed tears in his eyes were all acting. "If you can't do it for him or For me... Do it for aunt Carla."

Mikasa grinded her teeth together for a moment. She can see the reason behind Armin's words and yet couldn't find it in herself to see his vague plan to its end.

"Repeat." She demanded. "Repeat what I should do again."

"Nothing. Show yourself." Armin assured her. "If the day comes when we should propose diplomatic relationships with anyone ourselves without Hizurus assistance, we'll use you. And the more and more high ranking people recognise your face the better."

"You grossly overestimate the places the Azumabito are going to take me." she pointed out.

A knowing smirk on Armin's face told her otherwise. "No. I have a feeling the Azumabito are going to go to huge lengths to retake their lost reputations." He leaned closer, a little less space between them. "So?" he asked. "Will you do it? Believe me, I wouldn't have asked if I hadn't triple checked everything."

Mikasa hummed. She didn't answer him verbally, just a small nod of her head. It made Armin explode with joy. "Perfect! I've pre-written letters that you might need for formal gatherings."

Mikasa took a deep breath. "Armin, remember, I'm not made for this stuff." She said, her face stoic.

Armin stood up. "Don't worry," Armin said with a convincing smile. "I bet the Azumabito will do everything for us. Just be yourself and see as many people as you possibly can, especially any ambassadors from foreign lands. And if you manage to become pen pals with any of them--"

Armin's eyes sparkled.

"-- That would be best!"

Armin was right.

The Azumabito were planning to show her around.

Two weeks after that conversation, Mikasa was in Hizuru. Lady Kyomi more or less convinced herself Mikasa was there to stay.

The backstory was a simple lie, or a simple half-truth. Mikasa was found with her Azumabito mark from her wrist on one of the islands near Paradise reign. Mikasa came to learn it was called the forbidden region too, because titans had been stopped in those islands as well. She arched an eyebrow at the backstory. She wondered how the nobles she met would react if they found out the island was actually *Paradise* island.

She wondered how the prince would react.

Because yes, she was going to meet one of the princes that night. There was a reason why The Azumabito agreed to Armin/Mikasa's offer so eagerly and that's because apparently different tribes in Hizuru loved to compete and meet up annually.

Mikasa's problems with the ceremony started with her dress, or a kimono, as lady Kyomi told him. She explained the details of the red

dress and the golden patterns, and Mikasa listened eagerly. It took two people to dress her up. The first kimono turned out to be small for her size so it had to be changed.

Mikasa's attention slowly slipped away from Lady Azumabito the moment she started talking about other noble families of Hizuru, deciding to focus on her own image in the mirror instead.

She looked more and more different than herself every moment, like someone had pushed her soul into a new skin.

(If she looked hard enough, she could see a glimpse of her mothers smile. It makes her heartache and a warm feeling settle in her body even against the obvious unease in her body.)

(Here... Miles and Miles away from her home, in a completely new environment where people looked like her, Mikasa wondered why she felt homesick.)

The ceremony starts at night so they leave when the sun is still in the sky. As she leaves the Azumabito state, walking down the small steps with even smaller steps of her own because the dress won't let her walk very freely, she caught Jean staring at her in awe.

Jean quickly looked away, clearing his throat in an attempt to cover it up and said: "You look... Good." he said, his eyes still on the ground. "Definitely fit for a princess."

"Thanks..." Mikasa whispered quietly. "... Where is your uniform?" Mikasa pointed at his plain black clothes, ones that matched with the other guards.

Lady Kyomi beat him to it. She stepped forward and gave him a sharp look as a warning. "You're here as a guard, private Kirstein." she reminded her. "If others catch you staring we won't save your neck."

She nodded at Mikasa. "Let's go. We will be late for the crown party." she said as she led Mikasa into the car.

Mikasa was used to staying in Paradise's palace. Eren stayed there more than he did in Carla's home. So Mikasa was accustomed to its mannerism and the large, golden places.

However, Hizuru's palace was quite different. The party was held in the garden until the sun set, and the actual party would start.

And yet, the more time passed and the more people lady Kyomi held meaningless conversations with, about topics Mikasa understood maybe two or three words out of ten, She quickly lost interest.

She tried. Mikasa will make sure to tell Armin that. Although all he wanted was for her to show her face and let people know her existence, Mikasa quickly found her enthusiasm slip away. She had nothing to talk about with them. Her military training and her adventures were all off the table as they revealed her true identity. Her interests in sportsmanship made the noblewoman arch an eyebrow, after getting commented about how she's a good head taller than them.

Eventually, Mikasa just let Lady Kyomi do the talking and introduction and she herself enjoyed the Hizuru style garden and surprisingly interesting fauna and flora.

The moment the party was going to be moved inside the castle, Mikasa used this opportunity to walk in the opposite direction of the other guests and moved deep into the garden. She walked until the sounds of people could barely be heard, her eyes followed the small river until she reached a small gazebo.

With nothing else in mind, she sat down, allowing herself to breathe in the gentle aroma of the garden and the sounds of the river running.

She stayed there until the sun disappeared from the sky. She knew she had to go back, this was the reason why she left Paradise and came somewhere with very little backup.

And yet...

The sound of footsteps crushing yellowed leaves on the ground caught her attention. Mikasa snapped her head towards it, but saw Jean holding his hands up in apology. "Sorry, didn't mean to intrude." he said honestly. "... But..."

Mikasa's face relaxed after a deep exhale. "Lady Azumabito is looking for me, right?" she asked.

Jean just nodded.

"Does she know you're here?"

"No."

Mikasa's eyes fell back on the river. "Then she's looking for you too." she said as a matter of fact. "... I don't want to go back to the party."

Jean pressed his mouth to a thin line. "I know... "

Mikasa said, looking down at her kimono. "It's... It's a little hard to move in this. Somewhat uncomfortable and..." she looked back up at him in his much more comfortable guard uniform. "It's... Strange. I don't even want to bother to do what Armin told me to."

Jean looked back, towards the castle, he tasted the words in his lips before he decided to let them all go with a sigh. "Can I sit down?" he said instead.

Mikasa nodded. "Yes but... It's not guard-like behavior." she pointed out. "Your cover will be blown if you keep acting like that."

Jean sat down on the stairs, a little smile on his lips. "You're right." he chuckled. "Guess neither of us are good at keeping this up." he

leaned back, resting his hands on the ground as he looked up at the cloudless sky. "To be totally honest I think this is beyond bizarre."

Mikasa nodded. "I gave up on understanding what's going on in Armin's mind a long time ago. But this one time, I see what he means about all this." she said. "Although... It's like asking a fish to fly."

Jean blinked in surprise. "Are you..." he asked. "... Do you think you were not doing good?"

Mikasa arched an eyebrow, challenging him to say otherwise.

Jean opened his mouth to say it, but he stopped. Mikasa turned back towards the waters, its gentle sound filled the heavy silence for a minute too long.

"If you need to hear this, your personality and character is..." Jean swallowed hard. "... Attractive enough."

Mikasa looked up.

"I mean-- come on" Jean whispered. "I saw it. Even from so far away, I could see people being impressed by the Azumabitos new heir."

Mikasa fisted her hands on her kimono. "I'm not their heir." she said stubbornly.

"You are to their eyes. And that's what we need them to think, right?" Jean repeated. "Believe me, Lady Kyomi was having the time of her life. And you? I'm not going to lie. you're hard to forget, Mikasa. The aura of confidence you emit? It's enough on its own to make the Azumabito to show off their guaranteed future and for the others to be interested to see how it turns out."

Jean shrugged. "Of course Armin means to... *twist* it..." he said vaguely. "But don't think for a moment you're a fish trying to fly."

You're an eagle doing what you're best at."

Mikasa stared at him with wide eyes. Jean stopped, then rubbed the back of his neck, and looked away. "Yeah... That's it..."

Mikasa waited for a moment, just letting his voice sink in. She looked back at the castle, thinking of the past half an hour spent here and away from the crowd she traveled so far to be in. "You're really good at this." she smiled to herself. "You're good at motivating people"

Jean put his elbows on his knees. "So I've been told." he whispered.

Mikasa stood up, she slowly dusted her kimono back to flawed perfection. The tight grip of it on her waist suddenly looked less and the texture didn't bite her skin.

"I'll go back." she ordered. "It would be bad if I went back without *my guard*."

Mikasa's face felt crooked with a meaningless smile. She quickly dropped it.

Apparently, her personality was attractive enough on its own.

"Thank you so much, Mikasa." Armin said when they returned soundly to paradise and Mikasa showed him the picture they took. "This is perfect! A Lot of people have seen your face and that means..."

Armin's smile spread.

He never completed what he wanted to say.

After so many years of knowing the other boy, Mikasa was sure he was given with some gift of prophecy.

Just as Armin had predicted, but hoped wouldn't happen, Eren reacted bitterly when Hizuru refused to help. He went on his own and even Armin failed to bring him back without sacrificing himself.

And now, Eren showed up at Paradise's shores, a thousand questions about Armin on his lips. Questions no one truly knew the answer to. The Military police were notified and in between the time it took for them to arrive, Mikasa saw Eren question everything about himself in a corner of the balcony.

She walked in on his solitude and without a moment of hesitancy. "Armin warned me you'll eventually betray Paradise somehow." Mikasa says. "... Right before he shoved all those political letters into my hands and told me what to do in Hizuru."

Invisible hands of shame push Eren's head low, too much force stopping him from meeting the others' eyes. "I had to... I can't tell you why but I had to." he whispers.

Mikasa leans back against the wall. "Well, the MP will be here any minute. So that's all you've got to tell me everything before they take you straight to Dina. And she is *mad*."

Mikasa narrows her eyes. "Historia has been on house arrest ever since you disappeared. Mother is losing her mind. What can possibly be worth all of this? What can be worth treasoning?" she asks. "And we had to lose Armin to Marley to get you back. How do you explain that?"

"I didn't want him to do that!" he stands up, yelling at the top of his lungs. "It was never supposed to be like that! Zeke and we were supposed to take on Marley during that Tyburs speech and-- and--"

"... But Armin made you come back home by giving himself up." Mikasa stands up to her feet, unbothered by the sudden and angry change in Eren's demeanor. "Or else what? Would you have been ok with killing innocents? *Children*?"

Her words strike a heavy silence.

One coupled by Eren's eyes that slowly grew colder and colder.

Yes.

Mikasa doesn't need to hear the actual word to know Eren would have killed innocents if Armin hadn't intervened.

Their solitude is broken when Jean opens the door with a gentle knock. "Eren." he says, nodding at him. "The MP are here..." he trails off and opens the door completely to reveal Marco in his full MP uniform.

He doesn't wave or smile and joke as he normally does. It takes a moment for Eren to realize Marco is the MP responsible who will take him to the palace.

that explains the lack of his usual politeness . Eren thinks as he stands up.

"I wish I could see you again under better circumstances." Marco says. "I need to take you to the palace. The Queen is..." Marco clears his throat. "I need to take you to the palace as soon as possible."

"I'm coming with him." Mikasa says as a matter of fact.

Marco shakes his head. "I'm afraid I can't allow that," he says carefully. "Mikasa, you know the rules. The MP needs to take him to the Queen... But Jean can come with us as his commanding officer." Marco offers. "I'm sorry, my hands are officially tied for the rest of you."

"You--"

Jean stands between Marco and Mikasa, trying to keep her back before a rift is caused between them. "It's ok." Jean says

immediately. "I'm sure the Queen will allow visitation... Soon enough."

"Mikasa..." Eren puts a hand on her shoulder. "It's a mess I made, let me clean it."

Eren steps forward. "But don't even think about putting handcuffs on me." Eren says, an edge of threat to his voice.

Marco pushes the handcuffs back into his pockets. "Didn't even think about it." he adds jokingly. "Now... We need to leave."

Eren walked after him into a carriage. Jean followed him quickly afterwards.

Eren always thought of Dina's throne room as a warm place. Sunlight always peeked inside and the large windows gave them the perfect view over the blue skies. The paintings were remodeled into painting stories Eren never heard of but the bright red and gold colors were comforting.

Now however...

Dina sits on her throne, her eyes dark and tired with barely combed hair. Historia stands in front of it, with Ymir on her side. Eren doesn't miss the daggers she glares at his way.

The moment they step inside, Dina sits up straight. "Leave." Dina commands Jean, the order echoes around the room. "All officers, Leave. This is a family matter." she orders.

Jean and Marco exchange a look. They salute and find no other path but the exit door for themselves. Jean and Eren's eyes meet moments before he walks out. Eren nods weakly, Jean walks away.

Dina turns to Ymir, who's standing next to Historia. Her eyes are narrow, sharp. "You too, Ymir." she orders. "I don't want you to

witness this."

"I'm happy where I am." Ymir says defensively, inching closer to Historia.

"I won't ask again." the Queen warns.

Ymit holds on to Historia and pulls her closer by her elbow. "And my answer won't change." she says confidentially. Eventually, Historia steps in. She puts a warm hand over Ymir's hand and smiles weakly at her. "It's ok." she offers. "I face the consequences of my choices alone."

"Don't--" Ymir sends an angry look at Eren. "--Don't take blame for what wasn't your fault."

"Ymir..." Historia whispers quietly but confidently. "I promise. I can handle this."

Ymir squeezes Historias hand between her own. She sends an angry glare at Eren's direction. She's frozen on her spot. Until Dina aggressively clears her throat and Ymir lets go. She walks away, her eyes never leave them. Until the door is closed and her view is cut off.

Dina walks down the stairs to her throne, she fixes the crown above her shriveled hair and takes a deep breath. "30 seconds." she warns Eren. "You have thirty seconds to explain to me what the hell you were up to. And why?"

Eren frowns. His eyebrows twitch in annoyance. "Are you asking seriously?" he said, pointing at the closed door. "After everything?"

"What- what did you possibly want to do!" Dina asks loudly. "Ok? Why did you leave your squad and join Marley's army? To what end?"

"Because I needed to do something!" Eren shouts back. "With the route you were taking-- you would have given our entire future to Zeke on a silver plate!"

"That's a lie." Dina shouts back.

"That's true and you knew it." Eren yells back, pointing at Historia. "Not even SHE could hit some sense into you! You would have followed Zeke's plan no matter what it meant for others!"

Dina snaps her attention at Historia. "You have a tongue why didn't you say any of it yourself?" she shouts.

Historia closes her eyes with an annoyed sigh. "I did. Multiple times." she points out. "But--"

"But you didn't care enough to consider it." Eren finishes for her. "Because even if we'd opened up to you fully. You won't believe us. Because you--" Eren pushes his hands back into his pockets. "--because the only thing you care about is having Zeke next to you."

Dina walks up to him. A storm dances in her eyes and her hands fists on her sides until her knuckles have turned white.

Eren heard it before he felt the impact on his face.

Historian gasps quietly, covering the lower half of her face with a hand, staring wide eyed at the scene in front of her. In shock more than sadness.

Eren opens his eyes. His skin throbs but the humiliation hurts more. He turns his head back, glaring at Dina from the corner of his eyes.

"Don't you dare..." Dina growls, her chest heaving up and down. "... Don't you dare accuse me of being inconsiderate. I was thinking about the good of my loved ones! Do you have any idea what your own actions have caused to those you love?"

Dina pokes his chest, her fingers hit sharp and angrily. "I don't care what you were planning to do. Armin was certain you were planning to do-" another harder poke "-the rumbling, huh?"

Eren clicks his tongue but doesn't deny it.

"So he was right. Of course I would never let you activate the rumbling and ruin all I've worked for. But Zeke would have let you? Or maybe you would have overpowered him? He was right about making you come back too. He gave *himself* up." Dina steps back, holding the hand she just slapped Eren with. "Do you have any idea what it means to be tortured under Marley's regime?!?" she said. "That is the fate you've put on the boy you *begged* me to let you court."

Eren's eyes suddenly widened. "They... They're torturing him?" he mumbled, barely a whisper left his mouth.

"For goodness sake-- of course they'll start torturing him!" Dina yells. "If being an Eldian isn't enough reason, he's *paradisian*, for crying out loud, he's a high rank. Marley will pull whatever information they can out of him and they WON'T be gentle."

Dina grabs his collar, her weak old body doesn't have much physical power to do much more than pull at his clothes. Her eyes burn with madness. "Take a good time to process what you've done." she growls. "Even if we manage to save Armin by some miracle, he'll never be the one you knew once upon a time."

She pulls back. "So tell me, I need details. What the hell were you planning to do." her eyes move between Historia and Eren. "I need details and I need reasons. Now."

A heavy silence settled between the three. Both Eren and Historia held an emotionless face. It takes thirty seconds for Dina's temper to burst. "I've had enough of you two!" She points her trembling finger at the two, darting from Eren to Historia and backwards. "Don't think I've forgotten your betrayal!" she yells at Eren, her voice going higher

and higher with every word. "That was treason, Eren, *treason* ! Zachary is planning your death as we speak!"

"And you!" She turns to Historia. "Did you think I wouldn't find out!? That the two of you could scheme right under my nose! And now you refuse to tell me a word?"

Dina walks back and falls on her throne, her breath coming out shallow and shaking. "You two, you were *scheming*, planning, making a fucking new partisan organization in *my reign* ?" she said, watching in amusement as Historia and Eren mirrored different levels of shock.

"What?" Dina rests her head on her fist. "You thought I wouldn't notice. What's their name? Uh... *Yeagerists*..." she chuckles. "Did you forget who else is a Yeager Eren? Me. And I have eyes and ears in every corner of this island."

Eren's eyes narrow. "Of course..." he murmurs. "You just close these eyes and ears when you're close to noticing Zeke doesn't care for this island."

"What else did you want me to do exactly?" Dina asks. "Tell me, Eren, if *your* plan is so good, what the hell do you want to do with all the people that have drunk that poisoned wine?"

Eren's eyes widen, Historia takes a step back, both stare at the queen in horror. "How..." Historia wonders aloud. "How did you know...?"

Dina grinds her teeth. "How do I know?" she repeats. "I'm the *Queen* of this island. I know. Although this time, the people who betrayed me were my own kin. I found out too late."

Dina runs her hand through her hair and takes off her heavy crown. "There are hundreds of people infected! Hundreds." Dina yells. "And nothing we can do about it, *Nothing* ."

Eren clicks his tongue, almost rudely. "We can." he challenges. "If Zeke dies then they won't be in trouble..." Eren's eyes narrow dangerously.

"But that's not a path you're willing to take, is it?"

Dina takes a deep breath. "Both of you will be on house arrest." she announces. "Until I found out fully what you've been up to. Since you clearly refuse to tell me and Eren..."

Dina waves her hand.

"You're relieved from your duties as a scout." she announced.

Cold horror washes over Eren. He steps closer towards the throne. "WHAT!?" he yells. "You can't do that!"

"Yes I can." Dina says as a matter of fact. "I am the Queen. The forces obey me. And-- I'm feeling merciful." Dina scuffs. "A part of me wants to just leave you in the hands of Zachary and see what he does. I bet he'll put you in prison as long as he could find someone else to properly have the founder for us." Dina tilts her head. "But I owe that to Grisha. So at least don't be a part of the military, hm? My word is final. you can return to your job after this mess is over."

Dina shows them the door. "Now. Leave. You're dismissed."

Eren's blood boils. He wants to fight and argue further. How dare she?!? This was never hers to take.

But Historia grabs his elbow firmly and stops him. "Don't." she growls. "... Don't push it. I told you she'll find out."

Eren easily pulls his hand back. He storms out of the throne room, stomping his feet unconsciously. Historia follows her.

Ymir is waiting at the door and hugs Historia the moment the doors open. Eren stops, he looks back from the corner of his eyes.

Ymir quickly takes Historia's hand and they leave. As if to torment him, Dina appears behind him. "She's courting her. They're as good as spouses so I can't stop her from visiting." Dina says, slowly turning around to walk back into the throne room. "If Armin was here, he would have been given the same privileges when you're on house arrest."

Eren grinds his teeth until the pressure hurts his scalp.

Dina closes the throne room. Taking a deep breath as she rests her head against the cold wood.

She hears the footsteps coming into her line of vision.

"You called?" a middle aged man says,

"Kenny. I have someone I need you to kill. Make it look like an accident, of course." Dina says, taking a sip of her wine. "Yelena must not see the light of tomorrow."

Kenny tips his hat up, tips of his lips pull up to an invisible smirk.

Mikasa is called to the throne room.

And so is lady Kyomi.

It doesn't take a genius to understand what Queen Dina wants to do.

Jean follows her silently. Mikasa decides not to comment on it and lets him be by her side.

When they get inside, her first feeling is shock. It's strange seeing the normally elegant Queen Dina sitting on the foot of her throne and holding her head in her hands.

"Do you think they'll do it?" Dina asks her before Azumabito arrives. "I'm not sure if you're good leverage."

"It's not that." Mikasa says. "Armin wanted it to be in a separate way. If the Azumabito refused. I could try on my own."

Dina stands up. "Look at this chaos. They've already refused to help Paradise."

"What do you want to do?" Mikasa asks but she's interrupted by Azumabito knocking and entering the throne room. Dina's cold facade of a queen immediately slips into place. She turns to her guests with a diplomat's smile. "Well, good morning."

Lady Kyomi nods. "Good morning, Queen Dina. I'm afraid I was taken back by the reason for our sudden summoning."

"Oh. You know it well. You said Hizuru will not help us. To reconnect with the world for x y z reasons." Dina trails off. "Well, Lady Azumabito, I'm afraid I can't just accept that." Dina says as a matter of fact. "I know for a fact that three nations formed the allied mid-West have embassies in Hizuru. How hard would it be to introduce us to them?"

Lady Kyomi takes a deep breath. "It's not as easy as you put it."

"But gatekeeping Paradises natural resources and keeping that trump card to yourself is somehow justified?" Dina leans her head against her hand. "Stop it. The word will eventually get out that the Azumabito from Hizuru have partnered up with the devils."

Lady Kyomi doesn't react.

"Tell me, What'll happen then?" Dina asks. "Hizuru will abandon you and you'll be most likely stranded in Paradise. Won't it be easier to just cooperate with us while you can?"

Lady Kyomi takes a deep breath. "May I ask, what do you want to say that is worth risking your alliance with Hizuru?" she asks politely.

Dina looks up, fixing the unstable crown on her head. "It's simple." she says. "The enemy of my enemy is my ally. The only way we can get rid of the parasite that is Marley, we need to cooperate with its other enemies."

Dina points at Mikasa.

"And I'm afraid the matter is crucial enough that the Azumabito don't step in. We'll have to do it ourselves." she says. "The people in Hizuru know Mikasa best from all of us, right?"

Lady Kyomi presses her mouth to an angry thin line.

Carla is allowed visitation almost immediately. Eren is still confined to the castle but that doesn't stop Carla from rushing inside. She broke down Eren's door and immediately took her son into her arms.

Keith stayed a respectful distance behind, Eren and him just exchanged a curt nod. A small sign of *I'm glad you're not dead*.

After the initial joy of having her son back with her passed, the anger settles in. Carla yells at him at the top of her lungs. And smacking the back of his head once.

There seemed to be no end to it and Mikasa enjoyed every second of it.

(Mikasa still doesn't know what Carla used to bewitch Dina into allowing visitation.)

Mikasa eventually decides she needs to report back to Hange for tonight, that is until Eren stops her suddenly. He holds up a dark wine bottle in front of her face. "Mikasa-- I need to ask." Eren whispers. "Has anyone we know drank this wine?"

Mikasa looks down at the bottle in Eren's hands. She takes it and squints her eyes at the foreign writings. She could understand very

few words like "Wine" and "Grape" and nothing else. He gave the bottle back to Eren with a shake of her head. "Not that I know of. This was more for the high ranking MPs."

Eren's shoulders relaxed. He threw the bottle into the bin, it cracked and leaked into the basket. "Thank the walls." he sighs.

Marco's key in the lock makes a small clicking sound. "Man, when we were in training, I never thought you'd all grow to be such important people in the scouts."

Jean chuckles as he steps in his friend's apartment. "You say that every time!" he laughs. "You aren't so bad yourself. The Queens just handpicking people into her family from the scours." he throws himself over the couch in the middle of Marco's tidy and colorful apartment. "To be honest, sometimes I think she's playing favorites."

Marco sits next to him. "Everyone, this is day 1095 of Jean not accepting Eren is now a prince." he announces.

Jean hits his shoulder, purposely hard enough that it will hurt.

"Ow,"

"You deserved that."

Marco stands up again. "Anyway, I've found something I know you'll like," he says. "Since you love fine wines and perfect alcohol--"

Jean rolls his eyes. "That's an exaggeration--"

Marco smirks, his eyes daring him to deny it.

Jean just sighs.

"So..." Marco trails off and walks towards a shelf, he picks up a dark wine bottle and takes a long look at the Marleyan writings on it. "I took some for you." he holds up the bottle in Jean's vision. "I've

drank this Marleyan wine in a meeting with the higher ups, it's *fantastic* !"

Jean sits up. "You have one!? I searched the entire cellar and Nicolo wouldn't give any to us. Some excuse every time."

Marco shakes it. "Well, we can have some now--"

The wine bottle cracks and breaks in Marco's grip. Shatters into tiny pieces by the place Marco is holding it. He jumps back, he opens his fist and sees the glass has broken his skin.

"Marco- what happened!?" he whispers. He stands up and ignores the broken glass on the ground.

Marco stares at his bloodied hands. "I don't know..." he whispers. "It felt like a sudden spasm in my body and then... I don't know."

Jean's eyes soften. "It's ok... You've been under alot of stress lately." he whispers. "Where's the first aid kit?"

Marco closes his eyes. "but the wine... It's being taken from the market. I think that was the last one."

Jean chuckles. "It's ok, we can find some more eventually."

Marco smiles as Jean searches his apartment for the first aid kit. "... Yeah, I hope so."

"Are you sure about this?" Eren asks.

Dina sighs. "There are no better options, I'm afraid. Now don't plummet my self confidence, I need to appear queenly." she says. Eren doesn't say anything else as he offers his hand.

Dina takes a deep breath and accepts it. Dina's throne room quickly changes into white sand and dark black sky. Eren has to close his eyes against the sting of the glowing tree.

Dina doesn't waste a moment. **"Hear me, all People of earth."** she says. Her voice grows loud and clear and immediately, the empty sand hills of the paths are filled with Eldians of all kinds.

Different levels of horror on their faces.

"Eren?"

He hears his mother and turns around. She blinks in surprise and looks around. "... Where are we?"

Eren's plan was simple. The words Dina says will not only be heard by every Eldian, but also it'll leave every Eldians mouth at the same time. The Marleyans and other nations will be able to hear something like this leave every Eldians mouth all over the globe.

"My name is Dina Fritz. And I'm speaking to you through the way of the founding titan."

Eren nods and waves at his mother. He leaves with a thousand questions in his mind. He has something more important to do. They summoned every conscious Eldian, even those who were peacefully sleeping will wake up.

That includes Armin.

Eren rushes between the crowd, he sees people he never saw before and others who had Eldian armbands over their arms.

(One looked especially like his father, Eren wondered if they were his grandparents)

"For now, us, much like the rest of the Eldians of this world, have chosen to be passive. But do not mistake me for someone who would stand by and ignore the cruelty you have infested on my subjects."

With every passing second, dread rises into Eren's mind. Armin should have appeared and Eren should've felt his presence easily.

Exactly like he can feel where Mikasa and his mother are.

"I can't feel him." Eren whispers, his heart skips a beat but then starts beating maddeningly in his chest. He stumbles and falls over the white sand but immediately stands up to continue his search.

He runs around until he gives up. He looks around for Armin's grandpa. The old man has fallen on the ground, wide eyes staring at the sky. Eren kneels down next to the old man. "Mr Arlert, have you seen Armin around here?" he asks suddenly, then he wants to smack himself across his face because the old man doesn't know!

He knows nothing about where Armin is, because Armin asked for it to stay a secret from him.

The old man arches an eyebrow. "Where is this place!?" he asks instead. "Where is Armin? Is he in danger?" he asks.

Guilt and shame drowns in Eren. He stands up again

"you have painted us in the wrong and have even forfeited our ambassador of peace."

The world drowned in a long, meaningful silence.

"And You're torturing him."

Another long silence for the people of the world to understand what she means.

"this is an ultimatum. One more wound on his body, one more second pain, and you'll see the consequences the next moment."

Weak hands grab Eren's elbow. "Young man--" the old man demands. "Where is Armin!?"

Eren shuts his eyes and turns around, his look on the white sands under his feet.

"I, now, speak directly to the Tybur family."

The words are growled angrier than the rest of his speech.

"You have three days. Either the truth will be out and Armin Arlert is escorted safely outside of Marley. Or I will spill the truth for you. You have until noon on Friday on Liberios time. Remember, Friday, Liberio's gulf, return our ambassador home."

Just like that, Mr Arlerts death grip on Eren's body disappeared and he became a pile of sand. The people around the paths turned to dust, and the old man's knowing eyes were the last thing Eren saw.

Eren bites his lip.

He looks around one more time, even when he knows it's only him and Dina in the vast emptiness of the paths. "Armin?" he whispers. "Dina... Are we doing this right? He's... He's supposed to show up..."

Dina shuts her eyes. "He's not dead. He's not dead." she says immediately. "I can feel him. He's alive... But his mind is not responding for some reason. Probably because... Of some trauma to his head or a coma or..."

Dina trails off, none of the excuses she offers makes sense to Eren or makes the aching wound in his chest any better.

His chest feels like an empty hole.

He can't feel Armin.

He can't feel his warm presence, can't hear his voice, can't see his eyes or imagine the look in them as he talked about the outside world.

He can't feel him...

Eren falls to his knees, and fists the sand under his hands until his knuckles have turned white.

And as soon as that, the paths react to his emotions. The glowing tree blinks, moving and shaking in Eren's rage.

"Eren... Calm down." Dina repeats.

Eren fists his hand in the sand. The glowing tree in the paths continues to shake, all consuming and deadly.

"Eren--" she says a little louder.

"I CAN'T FEEL HIM!" Eren yells. "I CAN'T FEEL HIM, IT'S EMPTY IT'S ALL EMPTY!"

Dina narrows her eyes. By a snap of her fingers the paths wither away, Eren and her are back in the throne room.

"Why did you pull me out?" Eren growls.

Dina shakes his head. "Because you were close to doing something you would regret."

Eren tries to wipe his eyes, but once one tear falls from his eyes the others quickly follow. "You don't know ANYTHING about regret." Eren yells back.

"Eren-- I can feel that you want to flatten Marley." Dina says. "But remember, Armin is still there."

Eren shook his head, endless tears streaming down his face. "I can't do this-- I can't do this-- tell me the truth, Dina, is he dead!?"

Dina's eyes soften. "Marleyans are stupid but not that stupid." she says, for the first time, the confidence in her voice calms him down.

Dina's hand squeezes his shoulder. "Don't worry, Eren. We'll get him back. No matter what cost." she promises.

Oswin Arlert suffered from another heart failure after leaving the paths.

The news reaches Eren's ears a day late. He rushes into the hospital after being told Oswin Arlert miraculously survived due to being so close to the hospital and having a kind customer who rushed him into it.

Eren brings a bouquet of flowers with a "get well soon" card. The old man is lying down on his bed, reading a thick book with thicker glasses on his eyes. The old man looks up after Eren says a curt hello.

"Hello. Thank you for coming, Eren." Mr Arlert says. "Please take a seat."

Eren puts the flowers down. He rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. "I'm sorry I'm a little late..."

"... You're on time." the old man sighs as he closes his book. "I've known for ages that my weak heart will be the end of me. It was pure luck that one of my customers was there to save my life in my bookshop after... After we were summoned to that white dessert. That was... *the paths*, I assume."

Eren nods.

The old man takes a deep breath. "But Armin wasn't there..." he whispers.

Eren nods again.

"Why..?" Mr Arlert asks. "Eren... Please tell me this ambassador the Queen spoke of wasn't my Armin..."

Eren shuts his eyes. "I'm... I'm so sorry," he whispers. "This is all my fault."

"Come here..." the old man shuts his book and puts it aside. His trembling hand, with an IV hooked into it, holds up towards Eren.

Eren walks over. The old man moves closer to where is standing on the bed, Eren notices he doesn't have the power to sit up. "Eren, listen to me, young man." wrinkled hands held on to Eren's hands as tightly as it could manage. Oswin Arlerts aged and weak hand clings to Eren's for dear life.

Eren can just stare wide eyed at his state.

"You have the power, don't you?" The old man whispers. "I've heard about it. Read about it. I know it can go so far you can alter people's bodies."

Eren doesn't know how to react. So he just nods.

The old man takes a deep breath. "I need you to fix my heart for me. Just as long as it takes for me to see Armin again. I won't ask for more." his grip on Eren's hand becomes tighter. "All I want is to see Armin again. Make sure he's home. He's safe and away from the Marleyans."

His grip becomes impossibly tighter. "I know you can do it." he whispers. "Promise me you'll do it. I can't leave this world without making sure he's safe. Armin is... All I have left."

Eren closes his eyes, shame makes him lower his head. "I will try..." he says. "I will."

The old man sighs. "I know you will. And I know Armin chose to pick bigger than he thought he could chew again. But I'm sure he'll come back." he smiles weakly. "I never doubt his abilities."

The old man leans against the pillows. "You shouldn't either." he tells him. "Just you wait. Armin will be back before you even know it..."

"No, you will stay here."

Eren watches as Mikasa and Jean strap their ODM gear in place. His anger bubbling in his chest. "You're not sending anyone with them!" Eren yells. "Marley will certainly call in his warrior squad-- this is a trap! Obvious and-- for goodness sake How can you not see it!"

"Calm down, brat. Did you forget who you're talking to?" Levi says, pointing his thumb at Hange. "*Hange* is the commander. Not you."

"Thank you, Levi." Hange nods. "We need you here with the Queen, Eren. And Ymir won't be able to carry many people and keep up her speed at the same time." Hange points out. "So even if this is a trap, we've perfected it to the best of our abilities."

"I can go with them! Two titans is better than one!"

"You need to stay here with the queen." Hange orders. "The best you can do to help is to make sure our connection to the founding titans powers stays secured."

"We'll do it." Mikasa promises. "I will tear them apart if they have Armin but don't give him."

Dina claps slowly in the background. "I love seeing an Ackermans determination." she says. "Then let's fall back and let her do it, alright?"

In the distance, Ymir transforms. Just as planned, Jean and Mikasa climb up her titan and she jumps from the ship, swimming towards Liberios gulf.

Eren watches them with his naked eyes as much as he can. Until they were a dot on the horizon. That's when Dina offered a hand, Eren accepted it, and immediately they were in the paths.

"Let's see the world from their view shall we?" she says. Then the next moment. They are standing on small white pebbles, and the

waves crash against their boots.

And 100 meters in front of them, stands Zeke Yeager, a commander Eren doesn't recognise and the cart titan.

Jean steps forward, Eren quickly realizes he's watching from Jean's eyes because the view changes as he walks forward. "Where is Armin?" he says. "We're here to take him back home and just that."

Jean looks at the cart titan, then at Zeke Yeager and finally, the commander who scoffs. "So much for being a diplomat," he says. "And you want your ambassador back?"

"Yes." Jean says simply.

Mikasa's eyes move around the place. "This is a trap." she says. "I can feel it."

"I ask again. Where is Armin Arlert?" he says loudly.

"Reiner isn't here." Mikasa says. "Why isn't he here? Isn't he Marley's shield? That's suspicious to come with one less titan."

Zeke lights a cigarette. "Braun has made a mistake and couldn't be trusted to come. But don't worry..." he says, taking a deep inhale of smoke. "But you don't need him to speak with us do you?"

"They don't have Armin." Dina says as a matter of fact. She clears her throat, "tell your friends to fall back. They're buying time."

Eren grits his teeth. He fists his hands on his sides and wishes he was close enough to punch them with his own flesh. His eyes light up violet as he calls forth the power of the titans. "**Mikasa, Jean.**" he says, his voice transferring into their minds.

Mikasa flinches, messaging her temples to get rid of the headache but Jean seems completely unaffected.

"Don't do that..." she growls.

"They don't have Armin, this is a bluff." Eren says,

"Of course." she whispers, putting one of her hands over her blades.
"But one extra movement and they'll--"

Mikasa doesn't get to finish. Right at that moment, Piecks titan runs, jumping at the group and aiming to strike the jaw titan behind them.

"STOP!" Eren yells, not aware that he's using his founding titans voice.

Piecks titan sheds from her body like a second skin. Her titan stops and steams immediately, she falls down on her hands and feet between her steaming titan body.

That halts all the attacks. Mikasa immediately pulls her blades and looks up, soldiers are aiming their guns at them. Some even stared openly at Piecks steaming body.

"Incredible..." Dina whispers with awe. "You... You severed her ties to her titan completely."

Eren blinks in surprise. "What?"

Dina opens her eyes. "I can still feel her connection to her titan but... It's disrupted. You've forbidden her from calling forth her titan." Dina hums. "She should say goodbye to her cart titan form."

Before Eren can ask what she means, Dina has another demand. "Do the same to Zeke." she says and points her finger at the cart titan, still frozen in time.

Eren arches an eyebrow. "Honestly, I don't know what I did."

"You can do it." Dina sighs in relief. "Marley will surely fall in a few weeks."

Eren narrows his eyes. "I don't understand what you're talking about."

"I'll tell you. Take the titans powers from the Marleyans... And our friends in the allied midwest can fight Marley much easier." Dina explains. "Without titans power, Marley will fall in *days* ."

Her smirk spreads into a grin. "Do it. Eren." Dina demands. "Let's have some fun."

Reiner was simply breathing some fresh air when it happened.

Gabi, Falco, Udo and Zoofia are in the headquarters. Training on the ground floor where he could see them. He still needs to unwind from what happened, he's lucky Marley forgave him so easily after what he did to Armin.

Of course, like everything else in his life, this peace didn't stay stable.

"You have made your choice then."

Comes the sudden sound, barreling through the empty streets. Reiner hears it from the other's mouth and his own.

Reiners eyes widen, the world glitches and he finds himself in the paths again.

"The nation of Marley is awfully confident for a nation that has built its entire colonization power on the power of the titans."

Reiner looks up at the glowing tree.

"Marley has been deemed unfit. From this moment onward. Not one single Eldian in Marley will be able to harness the power of the titans."

Reiner looks down at his own hands. He starts to steam uncontrollably.

"let's see how much you can stay standing against your many enemies without the power you hate so much."

The world glitches again, Reiner opens his eyes and he's back in the headquarters. Below him, the children look up, different levels of horror written over their faces.

"REINER!"

The doors are kicked open and Porco jumps inside, grinding his teeth together and sweating from nervousness. Colt appears right behind him. "Yo, Reiner!" Porco yells. "The devils are bluffing right?"

Reiner looks at his steaming hand.

Colt narrows his eyes. "Why are you... Why are you steaming?" he asks.

Reiner shakes his head. He can feel the ever present buzz of his titan under his skin, but something tells him if he runs a knife over his palm right now, nothing will happen.

One week later,

"PERFECT!"

Dina giggles to herself, looking at the paper lady Kyomi had just given her. "Perfect, perfect, PERFECT! Eren, you did magnificent, I have half a mind to pardon you."

Eren arches an eyebrow. He looks at Commander Hange, the only other person in the throne room, they offer nothing but a half hearted glance.

Hange steps forward. "I'm afraid that only solidifies what I meant." they insist. "Marleyans won't sit back. And the first thing they'll do

once they need their titans back is to attack paradise with all they've got."

Dina's smile slips from her face. "I know. But even this deserves some celebration right? It was what we agreed over with the allied forces. We keep the titans away from Marley and they attack. Sounds like a fine deal to me. All we need is patience and time."

"Time we might not have." Hange points out. "Ever since Yelena's..." they clear their throat, "... *disappearance*, the marleyan volunteers have been reluctant to work with us and our modernization has been put on hold. On top of that, we were still years away from being able to defend ourselves from Marley's technology right now."

Hange shakes their head. "The walls will do nothing to stop an airplane." they remind them all. "And then have a lot of those."

Dina shakes her head. "So we're where we always were." she says with a bitter smile. "Waiting for Marley to attack, huh? We've done all we could. Moved all those who drank Zeke's wine to Shiganshina and posted our soldiers into all southern cities. In such short notice, what else can I do? The rest falls on the military's shoulders..."

Dina nods.

"You don't need to explain it to me. Take whatever funds you need to do what you want, commander Hange." Dina says, Hange nods and walks away.

Eren turns back to Dina the moment Hange is out of the room. "By the way, about the--"

"Ah, please, not Mr Arlert again!" Dina sighs, rubbing the sides of her face.

Eren makes an angry face. "Why do you always refuse!?"

"Listen, if we alter that old man's body, there is more chance that he'll die from that change than he'd die from another heart attack." Dina tells him. "Just... Tell him we did. That way, there's more chance he'll survive to the day Armin comes back."

"Why do you keep refusing? Is this one of those things you just *can't do* ?"

"Yes." Dina says finally, holding up a hand. "And no. I won't debate on this. The last thing I need is to cause a poor man's death because I don't know how to fix a heart. Please leave if you don't have anything better to do."

Eren turns around on his heel, marching away from the throne.

Dina arches an eyebrow. "Where are you going?"

"Didn't you tell me to leave?" Eren shoots back. "Shiganshina. Haven't seen any of my friends in a week. I just want to check on them."

"Remember, Eren. The best thing you can do in this war is to stay somewhere where we can use the founder." Dina shouts. "That's the only way we can get Armin back."

Eren fists his hands on his sides. He doesn't answer Dina as he walks away.

He understands. He truly does, if the enemy attacks his best use would be using the founding titan against them, but Eren had quickly grown tired of not being a soldier on the front lines.

Not when his friends are there and Armin is--

Eren doesn't waste more time. He hops on his horse and rides south. It takes a few hours to reach Shiganshina but he does. Instead of walking into the quarantined city, he decides to climb over the walls.

In one of her letters, Mikasa explained that it was her, Jean, Eld and Petra stationed in Shiganshina. Today, Shadis and the cadets were going to be moved to Shiganshina as well along with all the infected people. Most of the troops were stationed in Trost.

Although Eren still felt a pang of guilt each time he remembered the infected people still had no idea their wine had spinal fluid.

Eren walks over the walls and lets the bitter nostalgia wash over him. His memories of a time so long ago replays in his mind.

How many times did he have shifts on top of the walls as a cadet? Ten times? A hundred?

Something buzzes behind Eren's brain, an uncomfortable feeling settles in her gut. Eren's eyes slowly widen. The voice in his head grows quieter and quieter until he stops.

He snaps his head to his side and then walks over to the edge of the wall. He looks down and he sees a man in all white attire of a Marleyan soldier.

He recognises Zeke under the disguise immediately.

Eren gasps. "NO NOT--"

Marco stops, frozen on top of the rooftop.

Jean turns around, wondering why the other in the middle of their conversation. "Marco?" he asks, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You alright?"

Marco clutches the cloth above his heart.

His eyes turn brightly yellow before lightning strikes.

I want everyone to know I've written this story on the death note.

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Power house of the world.

Chapter 25: Power house of the world.

Hi there? Hows everything?

First of all, thank you all who left kudoses and comments, there give me life and I love love hearing your thoughts and opinions! No matter what it is☆☆ they get me going. Especial thanks to those who always comment, I love you all and know you guys by usernames xD

Here were are, Marley vs paradise is about to begin and oh, the warnings are getting intresting.

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

war, blood, life threatening injuries. (Possible) character death

"What was your name, Eldian?"

"Grice, sir." Colt answers normally and with the strict politeness of a soldier he is.

The man in front of him holds his knife with the tips of his fingers, marveling at the clear silver with such raw instrest in his eyes. He only glances at Colt from the corner of his eyes as he speaks.

"Right, *Colt Grice*," he says. "There is such a deep meaning with names... Take out esteemed guests for example."

The 'esteemed guest' is passed out three stories below the small room they were in.

"*Armin* ." he says. "I bet the parents were thinking the name would suit their son. Bet he was their first. It means hero or army man. Huh, they would name their son as a warrior and then cry ugly tears when he ends up under my hands. Isn't that a normal part of fighting, Grice?"

Colt doesn't react visibly. He simply nods. He holds his hands behind his back and his eyes staring at the wall, his face more or less emotionless.

Be careful with the bird, any small reaction will tick him off.

Mr Zeke's words ring around his mind. And Colt thanks whatever hands were involved that it's him and not Porco standing here, told to assist the torturer in what he might need.

"I specialize in Eldians." the torturer says half heartedly, "although you don't find much around these days. I guess all the brave ones killed themselves in one rebellion or another. So Arlert is like some fine wine over there."

He points the tip of his knife to the ground. "Enjoy it while it lasts." he whispers, the corner of his lips spreading to a smile. "Now, we need to go to business. Have you heard of the Eldian gas chambers, Grice?"

Grice wets his lips before speaking. "I know very little," he says.

"It's year 746, two years since the Eldian king was defeated and the peak of studies done on Eldian bodies. A random scientist discovers that Eldian brains react differently to certain chemicals. It causes a severe increase of adrenaline and oh--" The bird shakes his head. He stands up.

"Prepare the gas chambers," he orders. "And know if you inhale the damn thing you'll be my second plaything."

Colt nods stoically.

Can the air smell bitter?

Armin never knew it could. He thought perhaps he knew the worst, nothing could ever compete with the smell of blood under the colossal titans feet.

This?

Paths failed to rid his body from exhaustion, in fact it worsened it from all the extensive healing. Although he's no longer losing his life's blood, he can't exactly fight the soldiers when they yank him out of his cell and throw him into a new chamber.

The only notable difference is the air.

This one doesn't have a window, much like his previous cell, but his new 'home' is completely sealed. Windowless and with one metallic door.

And it's coming from the bright white walls.

A bitter smell, it makes Armin nauseous and itches his skin. It doesn't take a genius to understand Armin's inhaling a new chemical in this room.

Armin lies down, staring upwards at the ceiling and wondering what the bird has in mind now. He lifts his shaking hands and stares at his fingerless palms.

He covers his eyes with his forearm. He takes a deep breath and tells himself to enjoy the very few hours he got before they returned. Obviously, to get more information from him.

He lays on the ground and closes his eyes. An odd feeling runs through his body. His mind is numb, abnormally so. And his heart refuses to calm down, as if he's running.

And running.

And running.

His heart kept running and running and running even *hours* into his new accommodation, refusing to calm down. His veins throb painfully.

Armin looks at his faint reflection on the full metal walls, his bloodshot eyes stare back. Suddenly, he's aware of the pulse in his scalp.

Armin tries to calm himself down.

Nothing, None of the breathing techniques calm his heart beat. At first he thinks maybe his body has decided to step up its game in feeling anxious.

Then the bitterness of the air hits him.

Armin's eyes soften.

The gas...

It's impossible to calm down when chemicals are altering your body, huh?

Armin sits up and hugs his knees and buried his head in them.

The sound of his heartbeat echoes in his scalp.

Considering his grandfather's weak heart, he should be more careful. He might have inherited it and a heart attack will send him right back to paths.

How is he, anyway?

He left his grandpa without as much as a word about what he was planning to do. He thinks the old man has to be in his bookshop right now, maybe with an old book in his hands and taking notes of what he could understand. Maybe he was translating older books into something newer generations will understand better.

He's not titans food, that's for sure.

Armin runs his hands through his hair, he pulls at the hair strands, pulling another fistful from its roots. Armin shakes his head.

No. No. No.

"That's ages ago!" Armin yells. "That's not true! It's not true anymore- Not anymore- Not anymore--"

His heartbeat spiked. He gasped, feeling his ribcage expand and shrink more and more to take his much needed air.

"That was-- that was--"

"Ages ago, right?"

Armin freezes. He lets go of his hair and turns his head up. **Eren is kneeling in front of him, his long hair falling around his shoulders. He chuckles and shakes his head. "You know it is, Armin, I know you're smarter than to give in to your own hallucination. Remember? Your grandfather is safe in Stohess."**

Armin's hands shake as he crosses them over his knees. "Which one are you?" he swallows hard. "Are you... Eren of the paths?" The throbbing behind Armin's eyes continues, he closes his eyes and massages them as hard as he can. "You're the one in the path--?"

A finger immediately silences him, Eren then cups his chin and removes his hand from his eyes. "Hush" he says, the grip on

his chin makes him keep eye contact. "You don't want to spill the beans do you?"

Armin opens his mouth to say something. **Eren's thumb moves over his lips.** Armin swallows the questions.

"You want to ask how I'm here when you haven't died, right?" he says, his lips spreading to a smirk.

Armin nods.

Eren kneels down next to him. "Well, You're half dead right now." he laughs. "Something will help, you know."

"What?" Armin mumbles.

"Huh, Me. I'm here of course."

A laugh slips from Armin's lips.

The doors open when Armin starts to mumble incoherently. Armin's eyes can't focus on the man's face that stands right in front of him. His vision blurs, violet eyes too dilated to see anything.

"Hello, Arlert," says the mysteriously familiar voice. The sound reaches his ears from an ocean of invisible water. "I have some things that need your help..."

"I see your hands are full, Jaoda." Magath says, his eyes falling to the papers in the bird's hands.

The bird makes a face, smiling while frowning. "You know not to use my name publicly, Commander. My existence is a great secret of the nation of Marley. Although..." The birds' eyes look every single person in the warriors group in their eyes.

Zeke, Reiner and Pieck sat behind the table while Colt and Porco stood near the walls. The two exchange a silent look.

The bird hits his papers on the table and slides it towards Magath. He hits the papers a few times with his fingers. "Here is what you asked for, Commander Magath."

"Forgive my interruption." Zeke says, pushing his glasses up as he speaks. "But how can you be sure the information you received from Arlert in such a state is true?"

The bird smiles. "It's simple, warrior. I asked and he told me! I asked where his home was and he told me. I asked where the castle was and he told me. I asked how many of his friends stayed in the south and. He. Told. Me." he says, each time hitting his hand on the surface of the table. "The details don't matter to you, Eldian."

The bird looks at Magath, holding his hands up in an open hug. "Well, you have what you wanted, Commander Magath, I will return tomorrow to test more from my guest. May I be excused?" he asks.

Magath nods.

The bird waves to Magath as he leaves, winking at Colt as he closes the door behind himself.

Magath opens the folder and spreads the maps over the table in front of the warriors. "Alright, the great Marleyan military has given me the command to deal with Paradise, keep it back as long as it takes to deal with the midWest Allies." Commander Magath says. "Keep them occupied while Marley gathers allies to fight them. Obviously, the warrior unit on it's own hasn't been enough."

"What about the war with the midwest?" Porco asks before Colt can stop him.

Magath doesn't stop reading through the birds folder. "The higher ups are working on a temporary cease-fire." he says as a matter of fact. "If that happens, the supreme general himself will oversee this mission and we'll have more soldiers in our hands to fight off the devils. If not, the warrior unit and Eldian soldiers will be on our own."

Pieck hums. "But if the paradisians are able to use the coordinate, then it's a great risk to take a full Eldian task force to paradise."

"That's unlikely. But even in that event, the Marleyan navy is the back up. Even without the warrior unit, Marley can still defeat paradise with its useless barbaric technology." Magath points out. "The bird did a fine job getting valuable information from Arlert. According to his findings, Paradise has somehow contacted a group of marleyans and is trying to recreate their technology. Has already made a train on their lands."

Reiner arches an eyebrow. "That's impossible. Paradise's technology is far behind--"

"Well that's the info we have." Magath says, "... and it's all for the greater good of Marley."

Magath turns to the warrior candidates. "Colt, Galliard." Magath orders. "Go check on Arlert, his dead body can't talk."

Colt and Porco both salute at the same time, Although Porco doesn't bother to wipe his scowl from his face. This is a message. Magath is telling them he just wants the warriors in the room and to poor Porco, it's yet another strike to his ego.

They leave in relative silence until they get to the gas chamber. Colt goes to open it normally but Porco stops him. "Don't forget your mask."

Porco throws the mask at Colt's direction. He catches it in the air and stares at his own reflection on the glasses on the mask's eyes.

"Don't want you to catch whatever is in that air." Porco shows the gas chamber with his thumb. "You go. I can't stop myself from killing him."

which is a smart thing to do considering how Arlert loved to provoke him. Colt snapped the heavy mask in place. He took a deep breath

and let himself get used to the sound of air inside of it. He gives his friend a thumbs up and turns the door open.

There are two doors, one closes behind him as the one in front of him opens into the complete white room.

And a trembling body in the middle.

Logically, knowing Arlert is alive should have been enough to let Colt leave. But he was never a logical person. Torn between fear and logic, Colt takes a few steps towards the man on the ground and kneels down.

Arlert is laying on his side, his back to him and his chest rising and falling too fast to be healthy. Colt fists his hands and opens them with a sigh. He gently helps Armin lay on his back.

His eyes are bloodshot red and his wet patches on his clothes from sweating so much, nervously no doubt.

His eyes dart around the room, his body tenses like an abused cat, he pulls himself back from Colt's touch. "Huh? Who are you?" he asks, violet eyes glassy and red rimmed. "Your mask isn't funny..."

Colt hums thoughtfully. "I'm Colt." he says, his voice shouldn't be very clear. his eyes focus on his job and on checking Arlerts health, or well the lack thereof.

He puts two fingers on the man's neck. Arlert immediately shrinks away, covering his neck with his hands bandaged and fingerless hands. "No. No. I-- Not again!" he yells.

Colt closes his eyes.

Obviously, his heart beat is too high.

"I'm not a bird. I need to check if you need a doctor, I'm Colt, remember?" he says. "I used to do this when you were out too."

"Colt?" Arlert asks. His eyes widen and his hands fall to the ground. "Ah! I'm in Marley already. That's strange. Zeke hasn't met Dina yet..."

Dina? Why would Zeke want to meet with Dina?

"... Zeke?" Colt whispers, confused.

He quickly pushes the information into the back of his mind. He is here for a job, and that's making sure Armin Arlert hasn't sustained a life threatening injury from the birds 'dates'.

Arlert keeps mumbling incoherently under his breath.

"Huh, I wanna know how the mother-son reunion would be." he laughs. "Although I think I stopped it."

Colt arches an eyebrow. He certainly doesn't mean Zeke and the Queen of Paradise with this, right?

Colt sits back. The only injury on Arlert in this room is a mental one. "Man, this gas has done a number on you..." he whispers, eyes wide. "You can't seriously think--"

Colt bites his tongue.

"You're healthy." he declares and stands up, not wanting to get himself deeper than he already has.

"Grandpa, I'm so tired." Armin cries. He buries his face in the old man's shirt like is five years old again and the neighborhood bullies decide to use him as a punching bag. He grips the old man's shirt, as the tears stream down his face. "I don't even know what's real or false. Should I answer the weird man's questions? I feel..."

Armin lets go and looks at his open, fingerless palm.

"... It feels really weird when I don't."

The old man pats his head. "It'll be alright, you know it'll end soon." he says, his hand playing with Armin's hair.

Armin leans into the touch and rests his head against the old man's shoulders. "Grandpa... Can you tell me a story?"

"sure, my boy. Maybe that'll help you rest." his wrinkled fingers play with Armin's hair. "Just relax..."

"It won't... But it'll help." Armin mumbles. "Thank you for being here grandpa..."

His grandpa says nothing.

"Grandpa?"

When Armin lifts his head, Oswin Arlert is gone. "Grandpa!" he calls again, his skin turning as cold as the metal holding him in prison.

His panicked eyes look around, his heart beats rapidly in his chest. "Grandpa, where did you go?" he whispers, biting his lip. "... Grandpa!?"

Armin hugs himself and rests his head against the wall. The cold makes goosebumps rise over his skin, a deep ache in his bones that shakes his entire body.

"According to the information the bird has provided, Paradise has improved its defenses considerably in the past three years." Magath says, pointing at the southern shores of the island. "The forces previously guarding the walls are now watching every inch of the borders."

Magath looks up at the supreme general's bored expressions and his comrades around the table. "Although lacking a navy, parisians have apparently been using titans as a scouting mechanism."

Another commander chuckles. "Alright, that's probably one of those things the poor soul said to stop the bird from gauging his eyes out." he says.

The others remain silent.

Magath continues. "So technically, our initial plan of having an aerial attack seems to be the best option. One small attack from the ground at Shiganshina, where most of the garrisons seemed to be stationed. Then the airships can continue their work."

Supreme general's eyes drift off to the map, looking at the place Magath kept pointing.

"If we manage to retain the founding titan, the war with the midwest is as good as won." a commander says.

"And if we don't? Our info is flawed. It can be even false. Who trusts something a tortured devil has said?" one of the men behind the table says, he fists his hands on the metallic table and takes a deep breath. "Marley can't afford to split its warrior unit, navy, or air forces in half. Marley has been fighting the allied west for three years now! Even with the warrior unit we can not get back key positions like Fort Slava. We've spelled our own defeat if we cut our forces from that fight." the man says. "... In other words, we can't fight on two fronts. Not right now."

"We can't wait for the devils to decide to attack either." another commander points out. "We need to seize the founding titan before the devils decide to use it more extensively."

"The warrior unit is not at fault for the marine force's failure in the front lines." Magath points out. "But I agree. Fort Slava needs to be taken before we can lift another finger. Otherwise we'll lose on both lines."

"The colonies are waiting for the slightest chance to rebel. A chance we can't give them by showing weakness." The supreme general

says. "... But the weapons of mankind are advancing too fast. If we push our agenda on paradise too late, then without the founding titan we'll lose to modern days rapidly improving technology."

The supreme general sighs. He rubs his sore eyes and shakes his head. "Work on our strategies, Commander Magath, but retaking the founding titan will remain our first priority until we can make a temporary truce with the west."

The man stood up, the military officers saluted after him.

Arlerts reactions when he sees the bird is always the same.

When he is always confused and carefree in front of everyone else, his demeanor completely changes whenever the bird appears in his field of vision. His body stiffens and his eyes widen, he crawls back until his back hits the wall and his breathing becomes fast and unsteady like he had run a mile.

"Get away!" Armin yells this time.

"Oh! But we were just having fun." is The bird's constant reaction.

Colt wonders what's inside that gas chamber that makes Arlert so stressed and anxious all the time. So much so that he puts little to no fight when The bird asks questions.

Colt wonders if he even understands what he's doing.

Why am I even thinking about it?

Maybe it's the way The bird always refers to him as eldian. Maybe it's the half true half false things Arlert babbles when they're alone when he thinks Colt is someone else.

Information that Colt doesn't know which is true, which is false.

Colt doesn't want to think about it on his rare day off, he wants to enjoy this little bottle of whiskey he could buy from the Marleyan part of Liberio. He enjoyed the silence of the balcony of his room.

Until the door creaks and opens. Colt sighs as Porco throws his arm around Colt and pulls him into a side hug. "Aw man!" he says. "What's frown on your handsome face for?"

"Nothing, I'm just... Thinking..." Colt whispers.

"Well you're thinking a little too hard, eh?" Porco pulls the drink from his hand, he takes a long sip of it himself and lets out a satisfied sigh. "That's some strong shit you got here. Must be important."

Colt takes the bottle back. "Don't rat out the drink." he mumbles. "And it's... About Arlert."

"What about him?"

"Porco..." Colt looks back to make sure no one is looking at them. "There's been... A Lot of new information taken from Arlert since he was moved to the gas chambers and... It's insane."

Porco arches an eyebrow. "It's paradise we're talking about. Did you think It's sunshine and rainbows there?"

Colt bites his lips. "No. But it never crossed my mind that Zeke's mother is their queen either."

Porco barks a laugh. He took the bottle from Colt's hands. "Alright!" he closes the bottle. "You've had enough."

"He said that!"

"Well, Arlerts been inhaling whatever that gas is. He's probably hallucinating."

"Come on, Porco. You can't accept some parts of what he says and ignore the other parts! In fact this just makes Mr Zeke more

important! Imagine if--"

Porco narrows his eyes. "No, don't think about that now, look at this." Porco pulls a rolled newspaper from his pocket and opens it, holding up the page close to Colt's face.

"Refuges in inhuman conditions, Marley proposes cease-fire," Colt reads the headline.

Already?

He takes the newspaper from Porco's hand and stares at the picture of the horrifying battle scene, a city in ruins, a woman crying in front of her destroyed home in bloodied clothes.

"The war between allied midwest and Marley has caused thousands of deaths and injuries and millions of refugees." Colt reads. "A human catastrophe, as many read. To assert the situation and offer clearer inspection, Marley proposes a cease-fire for a short period of time. To give the people of both sides time to breathe."

Porco hits his back. "See!?" he laughs. "It's almost over! With this Marley can focus its energy on the devils island and the founder will be ours." Porcos smile makes a silent hope bloom in Colt's chest. "This time... You and I will be in that battle too, Colt!"

Colt rubs the back of his neck, Porco confidence and righteousness is as infectious as always. "Yeah..."

"Well, Wipe that frown off of your face." Porco laughs. "Chill out! With the info Arlert has been giving our victory is guaranteed! Although-- I have to say I bet *I'm* the one they'll chose to have the founding titans."

That makes Colt bark a laugh.

"Sleeping on duty?"

Armin's eyes shut open. He turned around, to be face to face with Dinas unamused smile.

Armin rubbed his sore eyes. "I'm not on duty, I'm just... Double checking."

Dina hummed. "Of course you have more interesting matters than the names and little... False... Information we have on some Marleyans." she wondered, waving her hands dismissively. "It begs the question, however, what are you hoping to find?"

Armin closed Yelena's case.

"Nothing." he added and stood up.

"Ah, I love it when you play this game." Dina smiled devilishly. Armin rolled his eyes and walked past her towards the shelves. Dina turned around to him, expecting an answer.

"I told you it's nothing." Armin grinded his teeth together.

"Eren wants to court you,"

The folder slipped from his hand and he snapped his head at her, glaring daggers. Dina looked too happy, as if someone had told a joke. She chuckled and tried not to laugh. "Your face says it all." She cleared her throat.

"So what? We kissed a few times, that's-- why am I even telling you this!?" Armin picks up the file and shoves it into the shelf.

"I need to approve of your courting, you know." Dina cleared her throat again, to stop her laugh but to no avail. She broke and burst into laughter. "Oh great Ymir. Great Ymir! you should see your face!"

Armin swallowed hard. "Are you here to taunt me!?"

"No, No, Ok, Ok, I'm serious." She said, "Alright, listen, usually, courting isn't permitted when marriage isn't the end goal."

Armin narrowed his eyes.

Why is she here!?

"But I can already hear Eren's excuses." Dina hummed. "I know what Eren'll say. You're too good for him. He thinks so highly of you to marry you. He has a limited lifetime. Blah blah." she shook her hand. "Usually the monarch wouldn't agree to a, mind you, useless courting but I'm willing to make an exception."

"Wow, thank you for such a gracious offer." Armin narrowed his eyes.

Dina ignored him. "Eren is planning to ask you out on a date."

Armin's heart skipped a beat. He licked his lips and tried to beat the excitement.

Wow, thanks for spoiling it.

"So, I need to make sure what you're throwing yourself into." Dina told him.

"I mean... I uh..." Armin shrugged. "What'll-- what'll be the difference between us Historia and Ymir?" he asked, just to make sure.

Dina arched an eyebrow. "Plenty." she said as a matter of fact, moving dangerously close to Armin's personal space.

A few moments of heavy silence passed. A time that Armin just stared at her unreadable gray eyes.

"I don't want you to be offended. You know how the nobles are..." Dina whispered. "They'll eat you up and find something to prove you're better suited for Eren than you are."

"Ymir is dealing with them well." Armin pointed out. Sourness rose like a bile in his throat. "Do you... Do you think I can't handle it?"

Dinas eyes grew cold. "There is no one between Ymir and Historia." she said, her lips pressing to a tight thin line.

Armin grinded his teeth together. "There is no one between me and Eren either!" he said in his defense.

Dina chuckled. "I beg to differ." she whispered, her hand rose to his collar.

Armin jumped back. "What are you--" he yelled but couldn't stop her from getting what she was aiming for. Her hand found a small metal string broken and she pulled the hidden pendant from under his shirt.

Armin froze, his eyes staring at Annie's ring as Dina held it up in front of their eyes. Her face lacked her famous triumphant smirk as she said: "Don't lie to me, Armin."

Frozen in his place, Armin's eyes stared at Dinas. Each nerve in his body looked for a time Dina might have seen the ring. He found none.

*Dina looked at Annie's ring, she shook her head in disappointment. "This--" Dina held up Annie's ring in her palm. "--I call this **infidelity**."*

Armin eyes narrowed. Anger blinded his eyes and he snatched Annie's ring back. He slowly pushed it into his pocket and was already thinking about buying a new string for it. "It's none of your business..." he said, never breaking eye contact.

"Oh it is. Does Eren know you keep the ring this close?" Dina challenged him.

"It's none of your business..."

"Oh, it is my business." Dina said back. "It involves my step son... And Carla's son. I don't want his heart broken. So either you take this off..."

Dina cleared her throat, shaking her head slowly. "Then I will not allow you to court Eren." she said as a matter of fact. "That is final."

"And then what happened?" The bird asks, playing with the tip of his knife in amusement.

Armin breathes in deeply, lets out an even deeper exhale, but the rhythm is so fast none of the oxygen reaches his brain. He lays on the ground, his eyes stare at his own reflection in the dagger in the bird's hands.

The cold metal hasn't touched his skin in days, but the fear... The fear of it...

"Eren in... Insisted and..." His eyes black out again. Rolled back in the back of his head as if he was dreaming. "Eren insisted and... Dina gave in eventually..."

The bird smiles bitterly. "Oh dear, what a love story... It made me tear up..." he sighs. "And about the Queen... Queen Dina, right? Does she happen to be active in the military?"

Armin opens his mouth but nothing comes out other than a stutter. "Di-Di-Dina is a tita-Titan-- pure pure one and I... It's all my fault."

Armin gasps. "Eren and I... Eren and I were..." he sits up with shaking hands and feet. The bird steps back, allowing Armin to live through another episode of the adrenaline rush caused by the gas.

Armin grips his prison clothes, searches for his collar and looks inside. His face turns white. "A-Annie's ring--" he whispers. "I... I took it from Dina... Where... Where is it?"

The bird tilts his head. "Oh. It's with me. It was taken from you when you were taken prisoner remember?"

"Im... Impossible! I always keep it close. No one knows about it. Not even Eren. Eren never found it. Eren must never find it I--"

"Oh don't worry, he won't." The bird offers. "You need to..."

Armin's hand reaches up to his face, holding his hair in between his fists and pulling pulling until his grayed blond hair is moments away from being ripped from his scalp.

And then when the pain doesn't come, Armin remembers he doesn't have fingers anymore.

Yet another illusion.

Eren must not find out...

Eren will hate me for it- Eren must never--

wait...

Armin's heart skips a beat.

"Well, Armin. This is Eren. He has the founder right, a prince too. Why don't you tell me more about him."

The bird's voice echoes in the gas chamber. Armin's heart stops beating maddeningly in his chest. He looks up, his eyes wide when he realizes the bird has asked about Eren.

Eren...

He always asked about paradise. One military base or another. And-- And Armin answered sometimes. Other Times he was too lost in thought to know if he answered or not.

He hated it. He was always either dreaming, hallucinating or in a constant state of fight or flight with nothing to fight and nowhere to flee.

"Wait... I'm... I'm losing my mind..." Armin grips his hair. "I can't-- I'm spilling--"

He can't believe it. All this time. He'd broken and said what he never would have if he wasn't drugged, or whatever the gas in this place was. He wants to laugh. If he wasn't the lab rat, he would have asked what system the bird was using that was so effective.

But one thing was certain.

Eren...

His name cleared a bright path in his foggy thoughts. Armin sat up, looking at the bird with blood shot eyes but clearer than it has been for the past few days.

Not Eren.

Armin grinds his teeth together, shutting his eyes and hitting his head to the wall.

You won't get your dirty hands on him you bastard. He thinks. There was only one way the bird would accept anything he says, and that's if he keeps up the act.

and to protect him and my friends...

I need to eliminate myself from the equation...

"Eren..." he says, like he's dreaming. "Huh! Oh! He asked me to tell Reiner something!" his eyes open and he looks at the bird. "Where's Reiner? Oh no, it's urgent... Can you call for him?"

The bird arches an eyebrow.

He stops playing with his dagger.

Reiner is called two days after that.

The bird, obviously discouraged about it all, simply led Reiner through the military base with a scowl.

Reiner narrows his eyes, his eyes darting around the place as they walk.

The silence remained until they reached a metal door at the end of a hallway. That's when Reiner stops. He turns to the old torturer. "So you want me to do what? Torture him?" he asks.

The bird smirks. "Oh no, no, no." he says. "I've done all the work. Now I just need to set the scenario in a way that'll make him lower his guard and spill. And you--" The bird holds a finger to his chest. "--he's mentioned you a couple of times when I asked about Eren Yeager. So there's a good chance he'll tell you a bunch."

Reiner presses his mouth to a thin line. "Aren't you torturing him?" he asks. "Why do you need me?"

"Oh, torture is not as simple as that. It's the art of making him lower his guards and then put them up again exactly when you need him to." the bird says. "Buuuut, I have a better way for Eldians."

The bird pulls out his dagger, he plays with the sharp tip. "I torture them first with knives and cutting fingers. Usually asking questions I already know the answer to. Like their names and such. When they give me the answer, the pain stops."

The bird looks at Reiner from the corner of his eyes. "Like Pavlov's dog. Some classic conditioning. When his brain understands that the pain and fear stops when he talks. I moved him to the gas chamber. The gas here..."

He hits the door with the tip of his dagger. "The gas here is something that automatically raises a person's stress hormones and fight or flight reflexes. And it works a hundred times more on Eldians for some reason. He's in a bad state. Can't sleep a wink because of

it, so he's hallucinating and confusing reality and dreams too. Poor lad. Never want to be him..."

The bird puts his hand on the handle of the first door and unlocks the lock. "We turned off the gas so that you wouldn't be affected by it. But Arlert still is so be prepared if he isn't the same devil you remember." he warns and opens the door.

Reiner nods silently and enters, the first door closes behind him and the second opens. His eyes can see inside and Armin, who's sitting in a corner and burying his face in his knees.

Armin doesn't understand he's here. Reiner clears his throat to make a sound but Armin doesn't react. The warrior makes sure his footsteps are loud as he crosses the distance to them.

Eventually, Armin lifts his head. Joy flashes in his violet eyes. "Reiner!" he mumbles.

"Armin." Reiner murmurs, his hazel eyes are blown wide in shock. "You are..."

Armin rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. Not being able to heal these wounds is truly a pain. Armin wishes he can at least relieve it but he knew with the slightest slip up from Eren of the paths and his torture would take whole new measures.

And he will die in creative ways while he's here. Death waiting at his door anyway, but he's pushed this far, what's some more?

Armin can't stand up so Reiner kneels down to be eye level with him. "They said... I could talk and take some information out of you." Reiner admits guiltily. "I am sorry, Armin. I truly am."

Armin smiles. "I know." Armin hums. He pushes himself up just leaning further up against the wall. "But there is nothing you can do about it, is there?"

Armin hits the back of his head against the wall. "I'm telling them shit I'm not supposed to." he says. "And... The irony is... My only way out is to keep talking... I will... I will say something that'll get me out of here for at least a while."

Reiner's first instinct is to joke. that Eren and Jean's influence has finally affected Armin's vocabulary. But he can only shake his head. "There's no way they'll let you go..." he whispers.

A painful throb on his chest makes Reiner doublethink everything. Reiner stands up. "This is wrong." he says. "I need to go. This was wrong."

Reiner turns on his heel and leaves. He was wrong to come here. What can he possibly say? What can Armin possibly say?

"Reiner, wait."

Just as he said that, Reiner stops. His hands freeze on the metal door and he turns to look at Armin from the corner of his eyes.

Armin pushes himself up and sits more comfortably against the wall with his bandaged, fingerless hands resting over his heart. He meets Reiner's hazel eyes with an apologetic smile. "Just so you don't go empty handed..." he whispers. "I'll tell you what happened to Berthold and Annie."

Reiner immediately kneels down and takes Armin's shoulders into his hands. He pleads with his eyes silently, his hands shake on Armin's shoulders. He stares at Armin's blue eyes, waiting. But his emotions slip through with how tightly he holds Armin's shoulders.

"Annie... Berthold..." he whispers, his hazel eyes growing wide. "What... Happened to them?"

Armin shakes his head. Armin sighs mentally. He's capable of saying what he wants with a perfectly straight face.

"I kept this a secret but I can't do this anymore." Armin says through his teeth but keeps his eyes sincere. Then he looks away as truth slips from his tongue. "I killed Berthold."

Reiners grip tightens. "Wha-What?" he shouts in Armin's face, some of his spit landing on Armin.

Armin slowly closes his eyes. "I overheard you guys talking. I knew he was the colossal titan but I needed to make sure. So I lured him into a trap and when I realized he really was the colossal--" Armin tilts his head, his eyes devoid of any emotions. "-- I killed him."

Reiner lets go of Armin's shoulders like he's burning up.

It's working . Armin thinks. His plan is working so he wants to smile but his heart aches for all the sins coming to the surface.

Reiner grinds his teeth together. "What are you saying!?" he growls, his tightly fisted hands shaking from rage. "You--"

"And Annie... She was eaten by a titan in order to save Eren and Ymir from accusation and prove Ymir's theory about titans being humans." Armin says before Reiner can stop him. "So I--"

Reiner holds his shoulders. "You're lying!" he yells in his face.

"I told them to--"

"--Annie isn't--"

"Give Annie to Dina Yeagers pure titan--"

"YOU'RE LYING!"

"--and they did it. I killed them." Armin swallows hard, Reiner grip bruises his shoulders. "I killed Annie and Bertholdt--"

The sudden impact on his face and the back of his neck is the first thing he feels. He falls and blood pools on the back of his head. His

vision swims and blackens but he sees enough. He sees Reiners vengeful eyes and the fist he raises.

Armin's bloodied face smiles right before he feels Reiner fist.

Reiner sees red.

It's the color of the blood on Armin's face. It's the color on his fists, he yells but he can't hear his own voice, only the sick voice in the back of his mind that told him to lash out, to get their revenge on the only person who ever accepted the responsibility of their deaths.

The only person who didn't brush it off as the greater good of Marley.

"Idiot! What did you do to him!?"

Soldiers attack him and push him back, Reiner remembers where he was and what he came to do when he hears the birds cries.

His eyes clear, he looks at Armin Arlerts disfigured face.

No...

The bird yells at him but he can't hear. The soldiers announce that he's unconscious, he has a faint pulse but needs immediate medical attention.

The bird argues, saying even one more minute away from the gas will ruin his masterpiece. The torturer shouts his frustrations, he can't choose between giving Armin medical attention or keeping him in the gas chamber.

Reiners mind gets clouded as he stares at Armin's bloody and unconscious face.

this was your way out...

"What were you thinking!" The bird yells at him in front of Magath. "Now he's in a coma! A coma he might not wake up from because of all the trauma to the head you caused!"

The man takes a step back and crosses his arms over his chest. "Even if he does wake up, it'll take another two weeks to train his psyche again, if he ever gets fooled again."

Reiner looks at his blood stained hands. "I'm sorry. As a warrior, I shouldn't have lost my cool. I'm ready for whatever punishment the motherland deems fit." he says, too robotically. "Commander Magath are you--"

"You will be relieved from duty for now." Magath says as a matter of fact. "It's a crime, Reiner. Be glad we can't risk an inexperienced Armored titan in our current situation. No more missions for you until we decide what to do with it."

Reiner salutes. Magath dismisses him so he decides to walk away but his feet don't move.

"Hear me, all People of earth."

The world flashes before his eyes. He can hear those words leave his own mouth.

Reiner looks back at Magath, who stares wide eyed. "Braun?"

The office changes, Reiner's eyes see endless white sand and a glowing tree. Reiner falls to his knees, looking around in horror as people appear around him one by one.

"Reiner!?" he hears Gabi, his mother and his uncle say his name. His eyes are focused on the center of the tree.

"My name is Dina Fritz. And I'm speaking to you through the way of the founding titan."

That explains it.

"For now, us, much like the rest of the Eldians of this world, have chosen to be passive. But do not mistake me for someone who would stand by and ignore the cruelty you have infested on my subjects."

"you have painted us in the wrong and have even forfeited our ambassador of peace."

The world drowned in a long, meaningful silence.

"And You're torturing him."

Reiner looks down.

"this is an ultimatum. One more wound on his body, one more second pain, and you'll see the consequences the next moment."

Reiner stands up again, it was only a matter of time before Eren lost his patience.

"I, now, speak directly to the Tybur family." the voice says. "You have three days. Either the truth will be out and Armin Arlert is escorted safely outside of Marley. Or I will spill the truth for you. You have until noon on Friday on Liberios time. Remember, Friday, Liberio's gulf, return our ambassador home."

Reiner falls back into reality. He looks around to report everything he heard to Magath but he sees both men in the room already making phone calls.

"You said it all." Magath says as he quickly takes notes. "We heard it from your mouth."

Reiner was simply breathing some fresh air when it happened.

Gabi, Falco, Udo and Zoofia are in the headquarters. Training on the ground floor where he could see them. He still needs to unwind from what happened, he's lucky Marley forgave him so easily after what he did to Armin.

Of course, like everything else in his life, this peace didn't stay stable.

"You have made your choice then."

Comes the sudden sound, barreling through the empty streets. Reiner hears it from the other's mouth and his own.

Reiners eyes widen, the world glitches and he finds himself in the paths again.

"The nation of Marley is awfully confident for a nation that has built its entire colonization power on the power of the titans."

Reiner looks up at the glowing tree.

"Marley has been deemed unfit. From this moment onward. Not one single Eldian in Marley will be able to harness the power of the titans."

Reiner looks down at his own hands. He starts to steam uncontrollably.

"let's see how much you can stay standing against your many enemies without the power you hate so much."

The world glitches again, Reiner opens his eyes and he's back in the headquarters. Below him, the children look up, different levels of horror written over their faces.

"REINER!"

The doors are kicked open and Porco jumps inside, grinding his teeth together and sweating from nervousness. Colt appears right

behind him. "Yo, Reiner!" Porco yells. "The devils are bluffing right?"

Reiner looks at his steaming hand.

Colt narrows his eyes. "Why are you... Why are you steaming?" he asks.

Reiner shakes his head. He can feel the ever present buzz of his titan under his skin, but something tells him if he runs a knife over his palm right now, nothing will happen.

Magath did the paperwork and asked the supreme general for the permission thinking he would be refused.

Never did he imagine he would be in the Tybur state, watching the children play and the seniors pray, and Lord Tybur himself welcoming him into their state in Liberio.

So he decides to give in to his curiosity. "Is the war hammer titan with us?" he asks.

Lord Tybur gives him a diplomatic smile. "Well, I assure you, it is in this room." he says, lifting a finger. "And I can say, they haven't been able to use their power since the founder forbade it as well."

Magath presses his mouth to a thin line.

"Lets have some fresh air, alright commander?" he asks and leads the way to a superb balcony on the top of the state. Willy Tybur himself leans against the railings and watches the statue of helos on the street.

"You're the commander of the warrior unit. So it's not hard to guess what you're here for." Tybur says. "I'm afraid the warhammer can do little against the founding titans will."

Magath hums. "They said something about your truth," he recalls. "What is it?"

Willy stays silent as his answer. He turns around, and gives Magath his usual fake and diplomatic smile. "What are you planning to do with this new scenario, Commander Magath?" Willy asks.

Magath looks directly into the lord's eyes. "If I were talking to the man running Marley from the shadows, I'd say he should reconsider putting so much trust on the warrior unit."

Willy Tybur hums to himself, Magath takes it as a sign to keep going.

"... And I'd tell him I need to know waits waiting for the Eldian race, and the warrior unit, if I am to make better judgements." he says.

Willys eyes on the statue of Helos the great over the head of the titans. "What awaits you..." he whispers. "My best guess is that you'll have to say goodbye to your warriors and the power of the titans for a good time."

Willy pushes his long straight hair back. "Which is why it's crucial to take the power of the founding titan back." he says. "You are here, so I suppose I can trust you with the tip of the iceberg about what *the man behind Marley* is up to."

Magath nods.

Willy turns around fully, his back to Magath. "We need to make the nations who have kept silent about Marley's wars choose. Because once there's a whisper of Marley being weakened..." Tybur smiles bitterly. "It shouldn't be that hard. Well, shouldn't be harder than fighting the midWest."

"But..." Magath trials off.

"Marley's current war complicates things." Willy says as a matter of fact. "The rest is a game of politics. We'll have a temporary cease-

fire with the midwest and focus a part of our forces with Paradise. The first strike should only be enough that we can paint them as the devils they are." Willy says as a matter of fact. "Afterwards, we can unite the world against our shared enemy."

Magath looks down at the statue. "And the cease-fire with the midwest?" he asks.

Willy hums. "The truth is, I had to pull a few strings with my friends and business allies in the midwest to make sure it happens. And I found out a few interesting things." he says.

"And what might that be?"

"The paradisiens had contacted them." Willy Tybur says and lets the reality of the situation drown in Magath.

The commanders eyes widen. "You can't be serious..." he whispers. "The paradisiens? How did they even manage?"

"I failed to understand the details but the truth is they somehow have. And the midwest is tempted to get the help paradise is offering in this war."

"So you mean they won't accept the cease-fire?"

"Of course they will." Willy says as he fixes his tie. "I'll make sure of it. Maybe tomorrow or today the war will stop for at least the next two weeks." he says as a matter of fact. "With the excuse of helping the refugees. The midwest needs time to collect their forces too."

Willy turns to Magath. "Keep that in mind. But Marley still has to keep the majority of its forces near the mid-west. Just in case they break the truce. Is that enough for a small raid on paradise? For our goals?"

Magath hums, and nods sharply.

"Good." Tybur sighs. "Everyone knows it, Marley doesn't need the warrior unit--"

"--To defeat Paradise."

It happened in a moment. A blink of an eye.

One moment, he was checking up on Marco and his comrades in the MP, the next, he was next to a 14-meter class titan with Marcos face.

And if that wasn't enough, he's surrounded by them, titans thirsty for his body. They immediately attack him, survival instincts push him out of his frozen state.

"Marco!" Jean yells, landing on the tallest building he can find. His friend titans eyes met his, for a moment, nothing happened.

But the next, Marco and the titans near him jump fast enough that they broke the building they were standing on.

"MARCO STOP!" Jean yells but to no avail.

Jean curses under his breath and looks around, in between the air and ground Jean sees ten eyes staring at his every movement.

Damn it.

Jean tries to evade each titan one by one, but he knows deep down it's only a matter of time before one of them catches him.

A loud roar echoes. A titan jumps in front of him and punches the nearest titan back. Jean sighs in relief when he recognises the green eyes and long brown hair. "Eren!?" he shouts. the titan nods, roaring once more.

With a heavy heart, Jean abandons Marcos' titan behind and jumps on Eren's titan, hanging on by its long hair. "The tower was our

rendez-vous point. We should meet up with everyone else there--"

Eren roars in his answer, he runs as fast as he can in his titan form towards the tower in the center of Shiganshina. "Eren!" Jean yells at the top of his lungs. "They've attacked at the worst time possible. The troops have left for Trost but the backup hasn't arrived yet. I think only the Levi squad and commandant Shadis are here."

Eren sinks his hardened fingertips into the tower and kicks a pure titan away as he climbs up. On top of the tower, Mikasa stands with her blades ready to strike at the titan, she stops immediately when she recognises Eren. "EREN!? what are you doing here!?" she shouts.

Jean jumps from his titan and Eren pulls himself out of his titan form, his body keeps steaming. "I came here to check up on you all, then saw Zeke and well..." he points at the air, vaguely pointing at the sound of titans around them. "And that's not all. I can sense them." Eren whispers, his eyes wide. "The scouting titans have spotted ships!" He turned to Jean. "Marley is coming, and it's coming now," he warns.

The pure titans clawing at the towers broke some of its bricks, the building shakes, followed by several loud roars from the titans below. "Yeah, kind of figured." he whispers. "Where is Zeke?"

Eren rubs the back of his neck. "I lost sight of him."

Mikasa arches an eyebrow.

"I know! I know! I just rushed into the city. He should be in the south." Eren says. "Where's Levi squad?"

"Right here."

Petras voice was quickly followed by a loud sound of an ODM gears zipping sound. She landed on her feet and Eld appeared right next to her. "Commandant Shadis stayed with the cadets. We've already

called for the captain and Commander Hange." Petra says, turning to Eld. "But it'll take time. For the next 5 hours, we're on our own. I bet Captain Levi will be here in 2. But still. It's just Shadis, You, me, Eld, Mikasa and a bunch of *cadets* ."

"And me." Eren says, pointing at his chest. "Give me an ODM and--"

"Why are you here, Eren?" Eld snaps. "You need to leave!"

"I can't just run away- this place is a battle ground place and you'll need all the help you can get!" Eren shouts back. "And I--"

"Jean, Deal with this. It's not the time to argue" Eld yells.

"Commandant Shadis has a plan. Him and the cadets will stay in the back, protecting Wall Maria's gate. Petra and I will stay in the middle and fight his titans. Jean, Mikasa, Find Zeke and whatever other titans he might summon."

"That's a good idea." Jean agreed. "Leave it to us."

"Good." Petra grinds her teeth. "These titans aren't attacking for the hell of it. We've already lost half of our gas and thunder spear resources. For some reason, they *knew* where they were hidden. It's safe to assume they know more than just where our gas supplies are."

Mikasa's eyes widened. "You mean... We're low on supplies again?"

"Not now, but we will be. Right now it's this tower and the cadets that can still be used." Eld shakes his head. "Take care. Right now, we're the only thing standing between civilians and another titan catastrophe."

That's all Eld and Petra say. They rush back and jump off the roof, the sound of ODM rings in the air as they fly away, back until their image gets lost between titans eyes and hands.

Eren turns back to his two comrades. "Alright, what's the plan--"

"The plan is for you to get back to the castle. You should have never left." Mikasa yells. She pulls out her blades, Jean follows her action.

"Come on, not you too!"

"No! Eren!" Jean snaps angrily. "We need you to get to the queen. The only real solution to this problem is to get you to the paths to fix this mess!"

"I can't just leave!" Eren yells back.

Mikasa grips her ODM gear handles tightly. "You must!"

"Eren got away already!" Jean shouts. "You must get to the capital and meet with Dina!"

"But--"

Jean points at the door. "That's an order!" he says, seriously and firmly.

Eren freezes for a moment. This... This was the first time Jean was using his commanding officer card on him. Eren fought the itch of telling him he's no longer a scout. The same Jean who tried to shrug it off and act as if nothing had changed. Now his hazel eyes hold nothing but dead seriousness and authority.

He has to be. This is no time for playing. Jean narrows his eyes. He stands up and fixes his ODM gear around his elbow. "Go." he says again.

"Are you using your superior officer card over me?" Eren says, much calmer than the storm in his body. "You'll lose the battle without titans."

Jean nods. "I know that," he says. "But we'll certainly lose *the war* if we don't use the power of the founding titan in the long run."

"The long run--"

"Eren," it's Mikasa who shouts this time. "Every second you waste here, you're lowering our chances of survival. Or our chance of getting Armin back."

"Leave." Jean says again. "This isn't your fight, Eren."

Eren clicks his tongue. He walks backwards for a moment and then runs at full speed towards the edge of the roof and jumps.

Eren transforms.

He roars and runs over the walls, running as fast as he could back towards the capital and the palace.

He sees the giant shadows on the ground, shadows of the airships, a few hours later.

Her bookshop is at its busiest hour when the alarms ring.

Oswin Arlert smiles at the customers and young children as they rush inside. He listens to the first graders' opinions who just learned to read. He gives recommendations to a certain black haired Bookworm with the thickest glasses he's ever seen.

(But sometimes, his facade shatters when little boys come up with books high beyond their understanding. Those who care for the wonders of the world. Or the ones who hold up heavy books with their little hands and beg him to read it for them. The times he's accidentally called them 'Armin' are too much to count.)

(But when the adults give their condolences, or worse, *congratulate* him on his grandson's martyrdom, that's when he asks them to leave and never come again.)

When the alarms ring, everyone evacuates. Oswin makes sure he's checked every corner of his shop for any children who are hiding or teenagers who've fallen asleep.

People run to the underground city, the possibility of the airships flying over Stohess Stohess and creating a warzone is much more than Titan attacks ever were.

Through the panic, Oswin Arlert stays in his bookshop. He has a few books he needs to make sure survive a possible bomb. He pulls them out of the shelves one by one and puts them in a small attic, with just enough space to hold the ten handwritten old books he keeps.

He opens the attic and slowly puts the books between the soft parchments and special ingredients he learned from Grisha Yeager to keep the pests away.

The doors being kicked open takes him by surprise. "Oswin-" Carla says. "Aren't you going to the shelters!?"

The old man smiles. "I'll follow you soon, Carla. Don't worry about me." he says. "There's just a few things I need to sort out here. These books are one of a kind. Can't leave them like this."

Carla opens her mouth to say something but is interrupted by another loud ring of alarms. She nods at him and runs back towards the shelters.

Inside the bookstore, Oswin Arlerts trembling hands push the ancient books into the attic. He pulls a letter from his drawer and puts it over the books safely piled between soft parchment and wood.

For Armin...

Oswin slowly closes the attic. Hopefully, the books will survive whatever war is going to happen.

Oswin stands up, but his eyes quickly lose their sight. Sharp, numbing pain shakes his left hand and he clutched his left shoulder with his right.

Oswin stays inside his bookshop.

No birds fly in the south of Shiganshina.

They all flew away the moment the first titans appeared. The only flying objects in this area are people. And people who are trying to save themselves from the clutch of titans.

Most of the buildings have been reduced to ruins by the titans transformations. Jean and Mikasa flew from between the streets until they found a tower they could climb with their ODM. From this height, they had a better view of where Zeke might be.

"This is ridiculous." Jean whispers. "But the only way we have is with so few people."

Mikasa wipes a titans steaming blood from her chin. "Zeke can't turn into a titan. He isn't as much of a threat as he used to be." she says. Her eyes search around until they spot a human standing on top of the walls. "There!" she yells and jumps.

"Mikasa wait--"

Mikasa flies past the building until she reaches the foot of the wall. "Mikasa, hold on--" he shouts. Mikasa stops on top of the safest building between the titans. Jean lands with a loud zipping sound. "It's never good when he's just sitting there," he says. "I'll act as a decoy. You sneak up behind him."

Mikasa arches an eyebrow. "Then he'll throw whatever he's hiding at you." she says. "What's the difference?"

"I'll have you to save me." he answers, he holds his hand up. "And you're stronger... deal?"

Mikasa doesn't answer verbally, she just hits Jean's hand and watches him fly away. Against all his brave words, she sees the

nervous sweat on his face. She flew to the gate, just as planned.

Jean flew with his ODM, when he climbed up the wall, he immediately threw one of his thunder spears at Zeke. Zeke is blown back, the attack takes him off guard but he stands up to his feet again before Jean can meaningfully injure him.

Zeke screams again, his voice charged with energy from the paths. Titans immediately climb up the walls, their hands barely miss Jean by an inch. They cover Zeke with their bodies and attack Jean immediately.

Jean jumps down, flying away from the titans hands and turning around over the walls. But a titans hands grab his wires and pulls him down to the ground. With his momentum broken, Jean hits the wall with a grunt of pain.

He rolls to the ground, the titans sounds don't let him acknowledge the pain. He runs and flies away with his ODM gear the first solid place he can. In the air, he hits his gas container and hears the dreadful loud sound of it, showing that it's almost empty.

Jean grinds his teeth together. He sends his ODM gear to aim higher and climb back to the walls but a titan grabs his wires again. "You clingy bastard!!" he yells. He turns around and aims his last thunder spear at the titan holding his ODM.

Then he's met with Marcos' face.

Jean's eyes widen, his body freezes and his hands unable to send the thunder spear. Time slows down, with each dreadful second Marco gets closer to Jean's body, his conscious mind screams at him to pull the trigger and send the thunder spear and yet... "Marco..." he whispers, his eyes focused on the titans freckles.

The titans pull his ODMs strings. When Jean pulls the trigger it's too late, the thunder spear misses. The titan jumps, he bites, white hot

pain swims in Jean's body from his feet and abdomen. He bites his tongue but still shouts in pain.

"JEAN!"

Mikasa appears on the titans back covered in steaming titan blood. Jeans reaches for her to stop her but she doesn't hesitate, swinging her blade over Marcos nape with ease.

Blood overflows from his wounds the moment the titans tooth is pulled out of his stomach, he falls, quickly losing his blood and senses. Black spots swim in his vision and not enough blood reaches his mind to regret anything.

The rush of air on his skin makes him realize he's falling. Mikasa catches him and lands them on an uneven rooftop. "Jean, stay still-" she growls as she lays him down on the roof, "I need to put pressure on your wounds." she whispers, recalling the very little she remembered about first aid.

Titans claw at the building, the uneven roof becomes even more unstable.

Mikasa puts her hand over the heavy bleeding teeth shaped wounds on his abdomen, the blood pools between her hands and overflows, no matter how much she tries to stop the bleeding.

"Mi-Kasa... Look at me..."

She snaps her head at his eyes. His eyes are half closed, his hair stuck to his face and the color in his eyes quickly fading away. Jeans hands rise above, just to touch a stray strand of Mikasa's short hair.

He smiles, like a child was given a candy.

"You have..." he chokes and blood starts to gush out of his lips and trails down his chin. "You have beautiful black hair..."

Then his hand stills and slowly falls back on the roof.

Mikasa's breath catches in her throat. "Jean!" she yells, putting more force over the wounds. Jean doesn't react, the pool of blood under him stops growing.

(The blood was pooling much slower, falling with much less eagerness than it did a few moments ago.)

Cold air dances over the back of her neck, like a ghost that wishes to pass right through her body.

Her ears hear nothing more.

Not of the titans' sounds, or the building creaking.

Mikasa inhales sharply. Her hands find a pulse point on his neck.

Survival instinct made her turn her head up, and watch the man over the walls who's towering over the city.

Mikasa fists her hands over his cooling skin with barely contained rage. She narrows her eyes and focuses her attention back on Jean. She picks him up, mindful of his injuries, and flies away to find medical help before the titans reduce the house they were standing on to rubble.

Aftermaths

Chapter 26: Aftermaths

Man look at the time, I can barely keep my eyes open. *sigh* the postponed midterms and life is killing me rn. But hey! At least I have this fic!

Ok, just one thing. I know this chapter is named aftermaths but I just wanted to leave the aftermaths for the next chapter so that it would feel so real if we see them from Armin's perspective instead of random changes yk?

Anyway-- hope you enjoy!

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

character death, mentions of torture, violence.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

After climbing wall Sina, instead of running top speed at the palace walls, Eren turns west.

For a moment he ignores the airships flying above him. Their number was lower than what he saw in Shiganshina, some deployed in Stohess and Trost no doubt.

Eren slides down the wall, leaving an irreparable line on the sacred walls. He ran west, the airships aim for the castle. He looks at it from the corner of his eyes as one of them slides slightly to the west,

So I've been spotted . He thinks as he stops. He roars at the top of his titan lungs, adrenaline and rush of an upcoming battle surges through his veins. He looks directly at the airship moving towards him.

How exactly are they planning to defeat the attack titan without any titan powers?

"We don't have telepathy. So it's crucial for us to have a safe rendez-vous point between us."

Dina's words ring in his mind. The little spot they chose, in the open area of a farm formerly belonging to the Reiss family in the west side of Wall Sina. Open spaces and long unkempt grass is the only part of it Eren remembers clearly.

Fine . Eren thinks as he roars. *come here, bold of you to assume I'll back down from this fight.*

Trost,

The alarms ring in all the cities of paradise, the southern cities are ordered to evacuate immediately or retreat to the safe underground zones, and the northern ones told to stand ready for an order similar to one.

Hange knows if it wasn't for the infinite times they practiced this maneuver, none of the citizens would have complied as fast as they are doing now.

The Scout regiment has to partner up with the Garrison regiment, which has recently lost its commander in Shiganshina. The replacement, Rico, is someone who clearly understands the severity of the situation and follows Hange's explanations word to word. She agrees with their plan, Hange doesn't know what they had to do if she didn't.

"Trost is where we assume they will land first." Hange says as a matter of fact. "And the majority of it considering we just got the news that Shiganshina was attacked with Only Zeke Yeager and his titans. Stohess and the royal palace are under the MPs protection."

Hange turns to Levi. Levi, with his eyes narrowed and anger rushing in his eyes in contrast to his stoic face. Hange shouldn't have mentioned Zeke. "Levi, get your squad and station them South. Rico, we'll need all of the garrison troops you can call." Hange says.

"Already here." she says.

"We have the advantage here, so we need to use it fully. Once the Marleyans deploy their troops they've trapped themselves in the confines of Trost. We only need to buy enough time for the founding titan to take action."

Connie and Sasha stay silent in their corner of the room, listening. If one looked out of the window they'd see nothing but clear skies and the havoc of the people as they ran underground.

That's it until Connie saw a silhouette of a titan over the walls. His eyes widen, assuming the worst that it's one of the titans from Marley. The illusion shatters when Sasha mumbles with horror: "is that... Is that Eren?"

"Oh no..." Connie and Sasha speak at the same time.

"That was Eren!" Connie yells. "Shit, he's coming from south so he's not near the queen right now--"

"Our work starts now." Hange orders everyone. "GET READY!"

The soldiers salute.

Stohess,

Even underground, they weren't the sounds of soldiers on the surface. For this moment, Carla's sure they are just the paradisiacs, for the next few hours, he might not be as sure.

The underground city was rotten, and has always been rotten. Carla had heard the stories from her parents and grandparents about how they did their best to leave it, and yet she's here willingly.

The artificial lights do nothing to light up the area, it's darker, colder, and silent other than the repetitive "thump thump" coming from the surface.

She expected to see no familiar faces, after all, Both Keith and Mikasa were called to Shiganshina and Eren was told to stay at the castle. Although she doubted he would have listened.

She doesn't believe it when someone calls her name until she feels a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Carla! Thank Ymir I found you!"

Carla turns around. The first thing she noticed about the not-stranger was the golden crown on her head. "Carla! Thank god you're alright. I was told the Stohess evacuation has ran into complications!"

Carla nods slowly. "Yes... There are... A Lot baggage being moved down here." she says. Although even everyone knows the underground city is nothing but a temporary hideout, some don't seem to be able to let go of some material possessions.

There is some movement behind her, Carla notices the princess and her royal court with a smug on her face. "Ah yes, it is me. I, the sapphic god, have answered your prayers." Ymir says seriously. Historia elbows her playfully, Ymir doesn't even flinch. "Now, can we address the war happening above us, *My Queen?*" she adds sarcastically for good measure.

Dina clears her throat. "Not much we can do. The rest of the fighting is up to the military and premier Zachary. Something *you* are a part of." Dina reminds her.

Carla looks back, her eyes dart around and panic starts to grip her heart when she sees Eren nowhere in sight. "... Eren?" she asks. "Where is-"

"Don't worry, he'll be fine." Dina assures her. "He's in Shiganshina, but I'm sure he was forced to leave before the battle started."

Carla's eyes widen. "Keith! He was in Shiganshina too!-- And Mikasa!" Carla holds her bag tightly, her knuckles turning white, a mix of nervousness and anger. "What happens now?"

Dina's eyes soften little, she holds Carla's trembling hands into her own. "We go by protocols and hope for the best. Commander Hange is in Trost and I have trust in their forces to counter the majority of Marley's attack. The ones in Stohess will be for the MP, if they attack the royal castle they'll find it empty and the MP are ordered to blow it up regardless of who is or isn't inside. At last..."

Dina sighs loudly. "I'm guessing that in the best case scenario, the southern cities will no longer be habitable. At worst, the entire island will be leveled. This all depends on our performance."

Carla lifted her face, hazel eyes wide. "How can you be so calm about this? Aren't you the queen?"

"I did everything I could as queen..." Dina says, no waver in her voice. "Can't expect myself to do miracles anymore. The one with an apparent gift of prophecy is currently being tortured in Marley." she squeezes her hand. "Stay safe." she says, more pleading than an order.

She turns to the MP who just saluted. "Is Stohess' evacuation finished?" she asks.

"Yes, My Queen."

"Good. Keep everyone secured. We've run over the protocols ten times by now. Abide by them and you'll be fine." she says, an edge

of warning to her tone.

Carla arches an eyebrow. "Are you going somewhere?" she asks.

Dina nods, a bitter smile on her face. "To our rendezvous point with Eren. If there's once we need the founder that's now." she says confidently. "I'll-- we will be back."

She lets go and steps back, glaring at the man with dark fedora that Carla never noticed until now. Dina turns to Ymir and Historia. "You know your duty?"

"No need to remind me." Ymir clicks her tongue.

Dina hums. "Good." she says. "I'll leave them with you, then."

The man with the fedora hat tips it up and throws his cigarette on the ground. "Did you say all your goodbyes, Queen of mine?" Kenny chuckles.

"I did." Dina growls. "Now we can leave..."

Shiganshina,

Mikasa flies through the city faster than she ever has, she ignores the blood slipping from Jean's titan-teeth shaped bruises.

She misses the titans claws by an inch. The further she goes, the less the titans. That means Eld and Petra have done their job, but where are they? And why aren't they at the posts they said they would be?

Mikasa pushes the worst case scenario out of her mind. If they aren't titan food, then they are with the cadets on the back. And that's where she's headed anyway, the only place she can find medical help.

And to her surprise, the cadets are evacuating. Their wagons are ready to leave and some have already left on their horses. A young boy recognises her and sees the body she's carrying and calls for a wagon.

She puts him on the wagon, immediately two of the cadets tear their first aid kits. One puts as much pressure as she can on his bloodied wounds and the other checks for his pulse.

Mikasa steps back, her face slowly losing its color. Why didn't she think of checking it herself? "Is he--"

"Has a pulse, but it's weak." the cadet says. "We'll get him the help he needs on our first stop in the eastern cities. And then Trost."

"Eastern city? Where's commandant Shadis?" she asks, slightly confused.

"The commandant ordered our after we put on the bombs." the other says, ripping the box of the bandage apart.

"Bombs!?" She says, more confused.

"Yes, all over the city. Shiganshina will explode."

And then it clicks. Mikasa runs back inside and jumps back inside the city. The only place where even a whisper of bombs could be heard was the place they kept their thunder spears, and all of them was filled to the brim with titans the last time she checked.

Of course, with the cadets evacuating and him and Jean at the front, the only people who would have been affected by it were Petra and Eld. So Shadis thought they wouldn't survive anyway?

not that Mikasa has seen them.

Mikasa slices two of the titans on her way, slamming through the windows of the storages. The glass shatters and she doesn't land gracefully. She runs to the top of the storage until she finds the old

commandant in a room, connecting some of the thunder spears together.

"WHAT are you doing?" she yells, not caring that he's technically her superior.

"I've connected a bunch of the gas tanks and thunder spears, an explosion here should set off several once until the entire city is in shambles. It'll tear the titans apart."

The building starts to shake, the titans pushing and pulling rhythmically now.

"What about Petra and Eld?" Mikasa asks.

Shadis stops for a moment. "I know you. You're that naive." he says as a matter of fact, confirming what Mikasa had been thinking.

They're dead.

"And yourself?" She spits angrily.

"Somebody has to stay here and make sure all the bomb work at the exact time we need them to." Shadis whispers as he flips the switch up. "Five minutes, Ackerman. That's all the time that's left before it all explodes."

"You can't be serious." Mikasa shakes her head. "What happened to all the talk about being special? You won't be able to be special if you die here."

"I was special." Shadis says and stands up. He hits his hands together to clean the dust. "... I was special... I was chosen by Carla."

Somehow, that only makes Mikasa angrier, her blood boiling.

Shadis turns around. "Four minutes." he says and Mikasa gets the queue. She turns around, unintentionally stomping her feet on the

way out.

"Mikasa..." Keith whispers, but it echoes in the silence loud enough that makes Mikasa stop in her tracks.

"I know you never really liked me." Keith raises his head, dreamy eyes looking above and at the clouds from the little window. "But Tell Carla... Ok?"

Mikasa turns to look at him from the corner of her eyes.

She nods, very slowly.

Zeke feels the explosions more than he hears them.

He feels the earth shake and the debris fly around, either killing the titan by the impact of the explosion itself or the ruins. Zeke looks down, an eyebrow raised at the destruction that happens one after another like clock work.

He's not worried, if Paradise comes out victorious or Marley, he has won either way. This is a win-win and Zeke can already taste the sweet victory under his tongue.

The sensation of his titans dying is a pain, however. It clouds his judgment far enough that he doesn't notice a dark shadow sneaking up behind him until he's tackled to the ground with a blade in his gut.

Zeke lands on the surface of the wall with a loud gasp. Mikasa takes the blade out from his body and he immediately starts to steam. "You." Mikasa whispers under her breath. She held the blade directly over Zeke's throat. "... You bastard..."

Zeke raises his hands on the ground, his smirk growing and growing until it's daring Mikasa to sink the blade in his throat. "Alright, I've lost." he says. "I suppose it's been a long time since talked to my mother. Take me to her. Isn't that what you're ordered to do, huh?"

The woman grinds her teeth, nothing of the calm and collected person she met in the beginning is left on the battle's sole survivor. "Yes, I'm ordered to take you alive. But I'm not ordered to take you with all your limbs." Mikasa growls as she raises her blade to the sky.

It reflects the fading sunlight into Zeke's eyes right before it comes down.

Secret rendez-vous point, Wall Sina.

"YOU FOUGHT WITH THEM!" Dina screams. "You-- you-- I don't even know what to tell you! You're an idiot!"

One look at Eren's titan and the blood that refused to steam was enough confirmation that Eren had indeed run into complications on his way. But Eren's titan paid no mind to Dina's outburst. He jumps from its nape and wipes the blood on his chin with the back of his hand. "Scold me later." Eren growls as the blood steams from his clothes. He holds his hand up, against all her anger, she takes his hand without hesitancy.

The world sinks around them, and then makes itself again as they appear in the white sands of the paths, and the glowing tree stretches its branches everywhere.

"Alright-- the game is on!" Dina shouts. "They were crazy enough to bring Eldians into this war-- let's show 'em our devil side, shall we?"

Eren rubs his wrist, his titan marks instantly heals. "Well, how are you so sure they have brought titans? It could have been an all Marleyan force." he says.

"Oh, please. They still need some forces in their borders." Dina sings to herself. "But if they kept the Eldians near their borders with their enemies... I would call *that* stupidity."

"Since you're not curious about it at all, I don't feel a soul in Shiganshina. So the titans are dead and the soldiers have evacuated... Probably." Eren says simply. "Well, you're not wrong, I feel some Eldian presences on their airships." he says.

"Perfect, let's see the world from their eyes."

They appear in the back of an airship. Dina doesn't wait, the moment she sees a Marleyan soldier with an Armband on, she taps his shoulder. "You'll be a titan!" Dina points at a soldier, "You'll be a titan! Everyone here will turn into a titan--"

Eren sees it happen in slow motion, the part Dina touched would gather a small yellow lightning that spread, that moment stretched into a thousand.

Eren pushes his hands into his pockets. Even with the advantage of the founding titan, the Marleyan forces were just too much. With their anti-titan weapons, what would a few titans in their favor do anyway.

He walks into the front of the airship and his eyes widen when it meets a pair of small, olive eyes staring at the view from the airplane.

And three more his age.

"Dina, wait." Eren shouts, his eyes stuck on the view at the back of the plane. "Falco is on board!"

"Who's Falco? You know him--" Dina walks over and freezes at the scene. "Kids..." she narrows her eyes. "They've brought kids into this mess."

She fists her hands and walks over to what Eren's remembered to be Falco's brother. She put a hand on his shoulder, "Well, tell me who's the boss of ya?" Dina whispers. "Show him to me..."

Colt freezes up, the light leaving his eyes.

Colt answers mechanically. His eyes lose their color as the will of the founding titan takes over his body.

Porco notices it from the corner of his eyes. He lifts his hands and points at Magath in front of him. "Commander Magath." Colt says mechanically, his stiff hands raise and he points at the commander in front of him.

Porco tilts his head. "Hey, Colt, you alright?"

Colt doesn't answer.

Porco waves his hand in front of him. Colt stays frozen and stunned in place. Porco narrows his eyes as he feels foom crawl close to them. "Colt, what's wrong with--"

Yellow lightning rose from Colts body and several other screams echo from the back of the plane.

It takes a moment for Porco to realize his own body was filled with lightning too.

"There..." Eren says as he removes his hand from Porcos head. "No need to drag this out."

"Oh, Eren, you look much more satisfied with this than I am..."

The titans formed in slow motion, it seemed Founder Ymir still had trouble making their titans. It would suffice, after all, they are on an unstable plane.

"You, keep Falco and his friends safe. Armin will be pissed if he finds out I killed his friend." Eren orders Colts titan. "And you, keep Magath. He's a good bargaining chip to get Armin back."

And with that, they return to the paths.

For a moment, Dina hesitates to let them go back to the material world. She looks up, her head tilted as she thinks. "Hey Eren..." she asks. "By the way... Do you feel an Eldians presence near Marley? Preferably near their borders with the allied west?"

Eren arches an eyebrow. "I... Think?" he whispers. "I'm not so good with this coordinate this."

"Just take us to the furthest Western Eldian presence you can find." Dina urges. "I'm starting to think these Marleyan might just be that desperate to leave Eldian soldiers at their borders."

Eren closes his eyes. "And why is that a bad thing?"

"Ah, Eren, you lack so much creativity apparently."

Eren tries to focus and do as she suggested. This little mental effort of his made them appear in a desolated area, above barren lands and between two warzones.

Dina barks a laugh.

Eren stares at her openly. "What.... What the hell is so funny?"

In this part of the world, the sun is still high above them, still noon. They are exactly between two trenches. Eren recognised the Marleyan uniform on his right.

Dina wipes a tear and clears her throat, a smile sitting on her lips. "Oh nothing..." Dina says. "For whatever reason, there are still Eldian soldiers present in their warzones. Say Eren, what do you say?"

Eren looks at the distance. "About what?"

"About breaking their cease-fire?"

Eren arches an eyebrow. "And how exactly are you planning to do that?" he asks.

Dina waves her hand. "Let the Eldian soldiers see something wrong. I'll make them see that their enemy has attacked. So they'll attack and..." she waves both of her hands in the air. "... Boom."

"Oh..." Eren whispers in shock. "They'll kill each other for us."

"I've already done it." Dina says.

She is right because right at that moment he hears a shout and bullets fire. Eren unconsciously covers his face, and they are immediately transported into the paths.

"No! I wasn't done." Dina whispers. "We need to do more damage to Marley's Eldian side."

"Are you kidding me?" Eren sighs. "Even if you line up every Eldian in Marley it's still going to do nothing."

Dina narrows her eyes. "Maybe not..." she whispers. "But I know one Eldian that can make a lot of difference."

"Who?"

"The Warhammer titan."

The paths shift around them until Eren is standing right of a woman in maid's outfit talking to a man dressed in a full suit and inside the biggest and most decorated room of their mansion. Dina clicks her tongue at the woman. "Woah, look at that, Lady Tybur, huh? The person I hate more than a Reiss is a Tybur."

Eren sighs, he just rubs the bridge of his nose. After so long, he knows not to interrupt Dina's monologues or else it'll just get longer.

"Even after everything, lord Tybur is still an Eldian and..." she holds up her hand in front of the man's face. "... Still a subject of Ymir." Dina smiles. "Oh what can I do? What can I do? He just needs a push from me to do something even he is convinced is what he wants."

"All he needs is a push." Eren repeats. "And are you going to push him?"

Dina chuckles. "Why would I not?" she whispers, she flicks Willy Tyburs forehead. "Let us eat some popcorn while he's obsessed with defeating the allied west first. Let him forget about us for a tad bit."

"That'll do nothing." Eren says bitterly.

"It'll buy us time and hopefully... Give us some space to work on our diplomatic relations." Dina whispers and shakes her head. "Let's get out of here. If we do more changes, it'll be suspicious."

Eren agrees.

This time when they return to paths, Eren is overtaken by a bone-deep ache in his lungs and a painful pang from a hole in his chest. Eren falls to his knees, the world swimming around his head. He covers his nose and mouth, then realizes what's wrong when blood drips from his nose.

"Oh no. It looks like too much working with the paths has its drawbacks on your body..." Dina whispers. "Can you stand up?"

Eren nods, cleaning his hand with his shirt. "I'm ok." he whispers. "I can keep up with healing everyone."

Dina rubs her forehead. "Oh... About that..." she sighs. "Mass healing will probably have opposite effect on so many." Dina tells him. "A Lot of people... Are going to say their final goodbyes on their beds today. So we'll just have to tell founder Ymir to heal those on the brink of death."

Eren wipes the blood off his chin. "And why is that?"

"Have you seen the titans Founder Ymir makes? One can't walk, one's disfigured and the other doesn't have hands." Dina points out.

"That's what happens when you tell her general orders... She just finishes things up like that. But... We have no other choice."

Eren lifts his head just in time to meet founder Ymir's darkened eyes.

"They've probably captured Zeke too!" Dina says cheerfully.

"Founder Ymir... Heal our injured soldiers please."

Something about the haunted look in her eyes will haunt Eren forever.

Hours later,

Days could have passed and Zeke wouldn't have known.

The Ackerman woman chopped off his limbs with quite the madness that would have made any normal human die on the spot. His titan saved him, one more added to the countless times he owed his life to the beast titan.

Although, the last thing he saw was the Ackermans angry eyes, so he wasn't expecting to feel soft materials under his body when consciousness slowly returned to his body.

He opens his eyes once, then closes them again, the light too bright and painful for him just yet.

The nurse above him notices the changes, and Zeke knows there is a nurse because he hears her gasp and curses as she rushes out of the room.

Zeke opens his eyes again, this time better than the last. Unlike what he assumed, he's not in a cell, but in a room. One with large windows that look north, away from all the destruction on the South. The room is decorated for him, it's clear it was intended for him because it's decorated in all blue, the color his mother thought was

his favorite. And a giant library, again something his mother assumed he likes.

Zeke stands up, his feet are all healed but his hands aren't.

Crystal clean.

The white mosaics shone on the ground, Zeke's blood and steam rolled down his newly regrown hands and stained them as he walked.

He reaches the library and urges his hands to heal faster. They do, some spark of yellow lightning tells him his beast titan is still unavailable to him. "Oh." he thinks. "So she isn't that stupid."

Speak of the devil and she shall appear. The next moment, there is a soft knock on Zeke's door and he nods. "Come in." he says, but instead of greeting his host, Zeke decides to pick a random book from the bookshelves instead, pretending to be reading it as Dina steps inside.

She doesn't stay in a corner, rather, just as Zeke expected it to, she comes to stand next to him, curious about what he's reading.

Zeke steps back, and ignores the heartbroken look on Dina's face as he puts some distance between them.

Zeke shuts his book, and puts it back inside the shelf.

"Did you like it?" Dina asks in a small, barely audible voice.

Zeke shakes his head. Instead of answering her, he asks: "Do you remember the time when I still wasn't a warrior candidate? And my studies were all about these histories... And you used to make apple pies when I got good grades on them."

Dina hums to herself, thankful for the smooth change of topic to something less cold. "How could I forget?..." Dina sighs. "... How

could I forget your face every time you heard the smell of apple pie. and we used to eat them with special herbal tea, didn't we?"

Zeke hums. "Is that what you're hiding? A surprise for me?"

"I'm afraid not. I haven't had the time for pies lately considering..."
She puts a hand on her head and fixes her crown.

Zeke nods. "You were never a good housewife, it was a cruel life to you."

"Well, it was what it was." Dina smiles softly. "And look where we are now, oh?"

Zeke fights the urge to prove her otherwise.

"Just... Just tell me what you've been up to over a cup of tea, alright?" Dina offers. "We have a lot to talk about."

Zeke nods, slightly tilting his head in a mocking bow. "Certainly," he whispers as they bring in the tea.

Days later.

They give a moment of silence for the people lost in the attack. Eren thinks it means nothing, not when the killer of three of them is sitting right next to the queen.

Eren clicks his tongue, he looks at Historia from the corner of his eyes and sees the same bitterness in her own. The three regiments sit in front of them with their commanders on the front.

"Thank you everyone for coming in on such short notice." Dina says when the moment is over. "But there was an urgent matter I needed you all to hear. Zeke, if you may."

Zeke stands up, neither of the military men present are happy to see him here. Some with fresh wounds, like Hange's eyepatch, are semi-

directly his fault. But he offers something even the most vengeance-filled one has the ear to hear.

"I have received news from my agents and allies in the allied midwest." Zeke says, keeping himself calm and confident. He releases an aura of authority that Eren fails to comprehend. Zeke has been here for less than a day, why is he acting like he's the boss?

"The supreme general of the allied midwest, through Hizruru and through me, wants to ask for Paradise help to fight the Marleyans." Zeke explains. "After the Marleyans broke the cease-fire--"

Eren and Dina exchange a silent look.

"-- and now we can offer them help as Paradise. Especially as we are familiar with their titans and warrior units." Zeke finishes.

"Warrior unit." an MP chuckles. "Is this a joke? Even if it's real, it's obvious the midwest is playing with us at best and wants to send any help we offer to its death."

"You're right." Zeke nods. "But have you seen or heard of any other nation even considering talking to paradise let alone offer allyship? This is a good opportunity to form allies and open up communication with a nation that isn't Hizuru."

Eren sighs.

Who does Zeke take them for exactly? It can't be just for the good of humanity that they are offering this.

Historia stops fanning herself with a deep black fan, and stands up. "There's just one problem, I don't trust you." Historia says as a matter of fact.

Eren points at his chest. "And neither do I."

"Eren, Historia, please." Dina sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "We're all on the same side here. Please don't embarrass me in the court meeting, well?"

"Stohess, Trost, Shiganshina, they are all inhabitable now." Historia says as a matter of fact. "It'll take months if not years to rebuild the foundations and infrastructure we lost. And right now, we have thousands of refugees and 20 thousand people killed and injured. He's responsible for a third of it."

Historia points the tip of her fan in Zeke's direction. "If this doesn't paint a clear picture of his part in this distruction I don't know what will."

"I was forced... To do that. Otherwise Marley would have realized my plans of joining Paradise and switching sides." Zeke shakes his head. "And yet, the information I offer here is worth thousands of lives. And it only took three."

Eren clicks his tongue, not verbally answering his brother. Petra, Eld, and Shadis' faces march in front of him. He takes a deep breath to calm himself down.

Dina looks at both of the royals. They get the memo and sit down. She rubs her temples, clearly torn between the two sides. "If we don't take this to offense, Marley will attack again. Sooner or later. And since all our southern cities are destroyed, I'm not willing to bet how successful he'll be this time." Dina whispers.

Zeke stands up again. "This is exactly what Eren and I were trying to stop before Arlert gave himself in and our plan was doomed." Zeke says. "Isn't that right, Eren."

The pencil in Eren's hands snaps in two pieces, he nods very slowly.

"If we had attacked after Willy Tybur had declared war, a lot of the casualties on Paradises side could have been avoided." Zeke says.

"It's the same here. We need to take action before another catastrophe happens."

Eren grinds his teeth angrily.

No, not again.

"Well I'm not risking my friend's lives in this one." Eren says standing up to his feet. "... I have a proposition."

The most half baked proposition these people will ever hear,

Premier Zachary arches an eyebrow. "And what is that?"

"It's simple. A partial rumbling. this is the only common ground Zeke and I will ever find." Eren says, looking at Zeke from the corner of his eyes. "If I control the rumbling, then I can stop if I feel Armin's presence nearby too."

if it somehow happens. miraculously.

That Eren doesn't say that outloud.

"This way, we can prove a few things. For one, our power, our ability to control the rumbling and lastly-- we won't danger our comrades." Eren says, trying to look at Hange's eyes only. "Even if I fail at this, the casualty will still be zero. The walls around Shiganshina should be more than enough."

Hange hums. "You are right." Then they turn to Onyankopon sitting next to them. "Can we report this and make some changes to it with your radio devices, Onyankopon?" they ask.

The man hesitates to answer, clearly calculating it in his mind. He confirms it and tells them the volunteers will get to work shortly after this meeting.

That's when Eren shoves his hands into his pockets and walks out of the meeting room, no matter how angry looks Dina sends his way.

He walks in the hallway, listening to the sound of his own footsteps until he stops and allows the silence to consume his mind.

Armin... You are much better at this than I am...

There is an empty hole in his chest, throbbing painfully at every reminder about Armin, and his torture, and the fact that he'd broken under it.

Eren takes a few shallow breaths, it does nothing to calm the raging thoughts in his brain, but it does clear his mind enough to realize someone is following him.

He spots his golden hair and beard. He fights the angry growl that rises.

Zeke opens his arms, almost mockingly. "See how good the outcome will be if we work together dear brother--"

Eren pulls out a shining new dagger from his coat pocket. He holds the dagger between him and his brother, holding it up as an ever present threat. "Don't even think about it." he says, deadly calm. "No shoulder pats or handshakes or any contact is going to be between you and me, Ever."

The dagger stays threateningly close to Zeke's skin.

"Oh, brother. I'm sure you'll grow to trust me soon." he says with a gentle smile.

"When hell freezes over."

"Oh..."

The way he says "Oh" is strangely similar to Dina's, Eren wants to hit him in his perfect teeth.

"We'll see about that, Little brother."

The allied west answered them almost immediately.

Eren arranges the date and time and Mikasa says that she's heard from her acquaintances in Hizuru that it's public news now. That the famous rumbling will help the allied west against Marley.

Eren doesn't know what to think of it.

(He says a lot of that lately: it is what it is.)

"This is your last chance to back off." Dina warns. "... We can think of something else."

Her warning is welcome but Eren always knew one way or another, he'd have to use this power. He's just lucky it's with his friends blessings and not something that'll flatten the world.

(Eren doesn't like to think about a world where he has to do that.)

"I can do it." He assures Dina. "I've read the maps a hundred times already, and knew where and When to start and stop. You worry too much."

"I just want you to be aware that in the best case scenario, you'll be killing hundreds of Marleyan soldiers. Then let the allied west take the land..."

"I know." Eren says, not a hint of remorse in his voice. He shakes her hand and says: "I know."

The allied West conquered the land just as they said they would.

If it can be called land anyway. The earth was crushed under the colossals heels and the few Marleyan soldiers, who were unfortunate enough to be there, were his victims.

(Eren never once felt Armin's presence nearby. Not even when he felt the death of the Eldian soldiers. Crushed and left nothing as a

stain on the ground.)

But one good thing came out of this partial rumbling, and that's the allied west found and conquered a military base, where they found someone matching the descriptions and photos of Armin Arlert. Someone they are willing to give back to Paradise as a part of their deal.

Eren was on his feet the moment he heard it, demanding a ride to the area. Dina refuses at first but when Eren threatened that he would just go himself, She obliged.

Which brings him here, on a ship that will first take him to Hizuru and then to the warzones.

What he doesn't expect is Mikasa approaching him with her full soldier gear. "I'm coming with you." she says as a matter of fact.

Eren looks at her from the corner of his eyes, then at the building behind them. "Didn't you want to stay with Jean--"

"Changed my mind. Can't stay here to listen to Zeke of all people and Mother--" She says immediately. "If I stay here one more second or I'm going to lose my mind. Besides, Dina ordered the aid of an Ackerman. Do you want Kenny or Levi in my stead?"

Eren opens his mouth to say something, perhaps asking if what he fears is true but he shuts his mouth and just nods.

The air is warmer, crispier, than Eren is ever used to.

The air gradually got thicker and heavier with every passing second on the ship as they got closer to the shore. The dark waters and warm sands felt more and more familiar until it clicked, he'd seen this shore, this destroyed city, when he was using the rumbling. However, he never felt like the air was boiling.

Mikasa walks in front of him, Eren has to repeat to himself that they are here as two normal soldiers, here to give Magath and take Armin. Nothing more. Nothing less. No Ackerman, No founding titan.

(And Dina would have sent two normal soldiers if Eren hadn't insisted on going.)

A squad of soldiers welcome them, shortly and curtly and strictly official. Eren supposes that all he can ask assuming not until two weeks ago they were bitter enemies.

The person in charge is a general with sun kissed skin and more battle wounds than healthy skin. The general has a thick accent Eren can't quite place, with all the T sounds pronounced as Ds and W as Vs. But Eren can understand and that's all he cares about.

"Send our regards to the queen." He says, never taking his eyes off of the road.

Mikasa's hisses silently under her breath as the soldiers put their fingers on the triggers.

"... Our deal shall go as planned." The general says.

They want to take them underground. Something Mikasa refuses for twenty minutes, her insistence wins and the general orders his men to bring Armin out of the underground hospital instead.

They bring him out on a trolley, the body stays lifelessly limp, moving with every little movement of the trolley. The soldier moves out of the way and Eren can see his face.

The cry tears itself from his throat: "Armin!"

Eren runs to the bed. His mind takes Armin's appearance like a sponge, the last time he saw him was-- too long ago.

Too long ago.

Armin's eyes are closed, his face full of scars and an oxygen tube in his mouth. Eren cups Armin's face and searches his face for any sign of him. Armin stays unconscious, deeply asleep and refuses to react. Eren's thumb caresses his cheeks, softly urging him to open his eyes. "Armin... It's me..."

Dina had warned him, Zeke had said it. And yet he refuses to accept it even if the truth is right in front of him.

"He's in a coma." the captain repeats. "The doctor tried every trick up his sleeve. He's still asleep."

Eren's hands fall to his shoulder, down his elbow his bandaged hands. His fingers were cut off, Eren flinches as his father's memory takes over. He hugs Armin, tightly, kissing his head and forehead as much as he could. "Armin... Angel..." he cries, although no tears left to leave his eyes.

Armin stays silent, pliant.

The relief that washes over Eren is cut short, when Mikasa puts a hand over his shoulder and squeezes. The doctor is screaming at him in a language he doesn't understand until the general translates for him.

He needs to lay Armin back down if he doesn't want his breathing interrupted. So Eren does that, the ventilator won't work if he keeps moving Armin like this. His hands tremble as he puts the blond down.

who did this to you?

The confusion and hurt in Eren's mind quickly turns blood thirsty.

Who did this to you!?

The general clears his throat. "I have something else for you too, Prince ." The general says. "Do you want to see the man responsible

for your sweetheart's position?"

Mikasa narrows her eyes. Their identity shouldn't have been compromised, what she assumes is another trick of Zeke's. But Eren hears none of it. He turns to the general and nods.

"Follow me, then." he says and turns around. "This time, I'm afraid, we have to go underground."

Eren follows him until he's in front of infinite stairs underground. That's when Mikasa grabs his elbow to stop him. "Eren." she warns. "They know who you are."

"You think I care. We'll just fight it out if we have to." he growls, he tries but Mikasa's grip is stronger.

"You're walking into a trap."

"Never walk out on one, and I won't start now."

"Gentleman?" The general asks, halfway down the stairs. "Are you coming?"

Eren pushes his hand out and walks in. Mikasa takes a deep breath and follows him inside, checking her weapons as she walks down the stairs.

"He's known as the bird." the general says, the soldiers open the doors of the dungeons as they walk in. "He's an... Interrogator... He's known for his torture methods. specializing in Eldians but he has had his hands on more than a handful of my comrades."

The last door opens and in front of them is a middle aged man behind bars, sitting on his bed and leaning his hand against his knees. The bird smiles when he sees the general. "Ah, General Sa'eed." Then his eyes drift to Eren and Mikasa. "Friends of yours? Wasn't female soldiers illegal in the allied west?"

Eren's eyes stared blankly into the birds. He feels nothing, the rage threatens to consume him like a tidal wave inches closer but he can feel the distance.

Still too much.

Still too much.

"Jauda, say hello to representatives from Paradise island," he says. "They're especially Eager to meet you."

The bird tilts his head. "Ah that's cute... Wait a minute. The girls Asian. Oh I know-- Arlert only ever talked about one asian... By any chance are you..." he smiles. "... Mikasa?"

Mikasa doesn't react.

"Then that means you're Eren..." The bird stands up. "Oh you, the green eyed brunette, you look strangely different from when Arlert was singing about you."

Eren slams his hands over the bars, the sound of it echoes all over the dungeons.

The silence afterwards is fragile. One that the bird breaks it with his laughter. "You really want to be on this side of the bars, huh?"

The general ignores him. "I'll leave him to you." The general says, "and uh, Eldian..."

Eren looks at the general from the corner of his eyes, barely sparring him from the madness in his green eyes.

Eren catches the key he throws at him in the air. Eren stares at the metal keys for a moment. "Huh?" he murmurs. But the general moves away, simply walking out of the dungeons and leaving the doors open.

The general doesn't answer so Eren pushes it into the lock on the cell.

It clicks.

Eren's lips spread to a grin.

The bird inches back, the clicking sound takes his attention to. He stands up, moving further from the door he possibly can. "Come back!" he screams at the ghost of the general. "I am a Marleyan, COME BACK!" the bird yells, hitting the bars several times to get the general's attention. "I have rights! Come back here, I HAVE RIGHTS!"

Mikasa doesn't get in his way.

(Eren doesn't know how he would have reacted if she did.)

Eren kicks the door open and closes it behind him with another. Eren cracks his knuckles, his eyes stare at the birds like a hunter looks at their prey.

"Marleyan huh? Rights? The freedom to do whatever you want to the Eldians and just..." Eren's voice strangely lacks the venom Mikasa expects it to. "You see, Mister. I also have a right very few people have. I am the founding titan after all." Eren grabs him by his collar, the man whose frozen in Eren's grip. "Want to talk about Right and freedom, Now? Cuz I have the time... And the fist."

The sound of Eren's punch echoes in the dungeon. And it continues until the birds can't make a sound anymore.

Soooo how was it?

You can say I wanted to bring Armin back into the story ASAP, poor lad has like nine months left to his deal expires.

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Paradise, Hell on earth.

Chapter 27: Paradise, Hell on earth.

Hello there! How's everything?

Happy new year

-- new Georgian year to be exact but hey, 2023 is by far better than 2020!

I wish you all a good year with great accomplishments and health!

WARNIING

WARNING

character death(s), mentions of torture, some gore, mass murders, war, amnesia. Warning for suicide too but it's not really suicide or self harm, but we warned!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Armin opens his eyes, and the vision isn't focused on anything. It's a swim of green, black and white that Armin's might can't make a shape of what's above him, neither what that implies.

"You're good to go now. Healed and all fixed up." says a voice that comes from under the sea, followed by gentle touches on numb skin. "But I think... It's better if you don't remember."

Armin is conscious enough to know he has a mouth and tongue and how to use them, he moves his head left to right on what feels like

cold sand under his overgrown hair. He opens his mouth to ask what the voice means, and then, he catches a glimpse of Eren's eyes and nothing more.

His eyes close against his ever growing confusion.

Armin wakes up not on stone cold ground the dripping sound of water in his cell. No, he wakes up on soft sheets and an ice bag over his forehead that chills his brain.

He slowly moves his hand, but it's proven too hard on his stiff hands. So he opens his eyes, this time, his eyes work without problem, but the act itself is painful so he closes them again.

There are hands over his body.

Armin wonders if he's so tired, His body can physically fight against the gas.

wait...

.... What Gas?

The world hovers above his mind, meaningless and image-less.

The last thing he remembers is the dark, damp cell he was in after the rumbling. After Eren killed their friends and enemies alike along the rest of the world but spared his miserable life.

Although, when Armin tries to imagine it, the memory is clouded, darkened and lost in his mind. Like a memory from a century ago.

He hears movement and shouting next to him, ignoring it becomes more and more complicated as hands gently play with his hair and pleading with him to wake up. He has to open his eyes eventually, especially when the kind person's mind grows to become more and more Eren-like.

No, there was no way.

Eren flattened the world, refused to kill him, and put him in a cell. Although he was against his execution for some reason and warned him, with terrifying determination, not to talk to founder Ymir..

But... Why?

The gentle hand playing with his hair grows steadily harder to ignore, it plays with the string of his thoughts. He opens his eyes, More in disgust than anything, and then his suspicions are confirmed and he gasps. Armin's first instinct is that he's different. His eyes are haunted and he looks sleep deprived like always, but his hair was neatly cut like when he was fifteen, he's finally out of his cardigan and wearing a plain white shirt. As far as Armin could see.

Eren's eyes soften, his hands cup Armin's face without a word. Armin flinches away, his eyes darting around, trying to understand what's happening. Eren brings him closer and kisses every inch of his face. First on his forehead, then on his cheek and then Armin is crushed in a hug, his face pushed under Eren's chin.

What terrifies him isn't the act itself but how familiar it feels. After all, the last time the two of them were this close was before he disappeared in Liberio. Armin pushes back but Eren is relentless. "Oi! Get away from me!" Armin snaps, pushing himself back further on the... Soft materials. Armin looks down, he's on a bed, a soft one at that, one clearly king sized and-

Confused, Armin looks around. Why is he in the royal room of the castle? He was in a dungeon not two minutes ago, Historia wanted to execute him, so why is he here? In a royal chamber. Didn't he disobey a direct order?

Historia didn't even want to acknowledge Hange, Mikasa, Jean and Connie's death. What can possibly be the reason she's grown sentimental to him now?

But first, the matter at hand. Armin pulled himself back, kicking the soft blanket off of him and hissing when it pulled a muscle on his back that Armin wasn't aware was sore. Eren puts both of his hands on his shoulder to ease him back on the bed. "Please, Armin, lay down. The doctor will come to examine you soon."

what doctor?

Eren ignores his outburst, instead his hands slide down his shoulder, too slow and sensual, and until he's holding Armin's hands in front of him, staring at his fingers with awe as if it's the most wonderful thing in the world. "None of this makes sense. But I'm glad you're safe." he whispers against his knuckle.

again, another act of affection Armin doesn't understand.

Eren kisses his knuckles and puts them back on his lap. His smile never ceases although it gets stained with tears of joy. "You're back home..." he whispers, wiping a tear with the back of his hand.

That's enough to pull Armin out of his shock. What does Eren mean with all this? Home? This isn't his home. It never was.

There's a knock on the door. Eren doesn't let go of Armin but tells them to come in.

"Eren, I heard the good news from the doctors. Hope this isn't another false hope you're--" Historia stops, she gives Armin one of his most polite smiles when their eyes meet. "Ah! Armin, You're awake."

Speak of the devil and she shall appear . Armin thinks bitterly. Armin pulls his hands out of Eren's soft grip. It all starts to make sense. They're manipulating him. Plain and simple. That's why his memories are so out of reach and blurry. They couldn't make him by locking him up and threatening so they're trying this instead.

Probably to make him forget the rumbling. Or maybe it's Eren's sick joke. To make him forget about Ymir and the thing he was afraid she would do to him.

Historia steps closer, her smile turns genuine as he congratulates Eren and jokes that he can finally sleep. Armin doesn't know and doesn't care. Until Historia turns to him and has the audacity to ask: "How are you feeling?"

Armin's not going to play their game.

He grips the blankets and his eyebrows wrinkle. "Oh, that's rich. What do you want from me, Historia?" Armin spits angrily. "I told you, I'm not taking your side so just kill me already." his lips pull into a smirk as he tilts his head. "You never mentioned tho, who are you giving my titan to, I'm *very curious*, My Queen."

Historia arches an eyebrow, she looks at Eren, expecting him to explain what Armin means but he fails to form words. His jaw drops. "Armin... Uh... I think you need to lay down again..." he says instead.

Armin smacks his hand away. "Don't fucking touch me you mass murderer." he snarls. "I still haven't forgotten the rumbling and all the people you killed."

Historia makes a face.

Armin chuckles. "What? Haven't seen my dirty mouth before!? No need to use filters when you're going to kill me anyway."

Eren's eyes widen, almost to two full circles. "How do you know about the rumbling!?" he mumbles.

Armin stares at the two of them, like they're insane. "I was there? You killed all our friends you might as well act like it, *Jaeger* ." he growls. "You two. You both cold blooded mass murderers you didn't even care about alternative ways we could have taken."

Historia is the first to recover from her shock. "Armin..." Historia says calmly, raising both of her hands. "You've been fed false information. The *partial* rumbling Eren did only targeted military bases of Marley. And most of the Marleyans had evacuated by then. It only killed a total 300 soldiers. That's less than the casualties of Marleys medium level assaults on the midwest." Historia reasons but Armin hears none of it.

How could it be? He was there! He was there when Eren crushed all the life under his feet without breaking a sweat!

"I always thought so highly of you. So the rumbling didn't happen? The alliance didn't go to stop it? And I as its only survivor am NOT sentenced to death?" Armin shakes his head in disappointment. "Didn't think you'd be a lying scum--"

"Oi oi oi! Watch your tongue."

The angry voice that echoes in the room gets Armin's attention for a second. It's been four years but Armin can hardly recall what Ymir sounded like and--

But he does remember what she looked like. All the freckles and her hair she kept tied behind her. It was shorter now, slightly shorter than what Mikasa used to wear in her final days. But the piercing glare was the same. She is angry, mad at what Armin was telling Historia moments before.

What gets Armin's attention however, is the woman standing behind her. She looks... Queenly. If the crown on her head- Historia's crown- isn't a dead giveaway, the robes and large jewelry are. She looks old. Her hair and eye color remind him of Zeke but otherwise she looks utterly disappointed.

Not that Armin cares.

"And who are you?" he asks. "Having fun with that crown or something?"

The woman tilts her head. "Is he alright?" she asks Eren and Historia.

Eren keeps his eyes fixed on every single movement of Armin, so Historia answers her. "He's been acting strange since he woke up." Historia says, spinning her finger over her head, signing that he's gone crazy.

The woman sighs and rubs the bridge of her nose. "Such is expected after being in the Marleyans hands for so long. What's he saying?" she demands.

Marleyan's hands?

"Hey, I'm standing right here! If you are planning on ridiculing me before my execution, that won't work." Armin says, a threatening tone at the tip of his tongue.

"Apparently, Eren has gone with the rumbling to destroy the world, and some alliance had gone to stop him and failed." Historia shrugs. "Oh, and apparently He's the sole survivor and I've ordered his execution."

The woman blinks in surprise. "Oh dear..." she whispers. "He's gone mad worse than I did!"

Armin's had enough. He turns to Eren, "Eren-- is this a joke?" Armin yells. "What? You're planning on me going insane? Are you making me hallucinate this out of spite?"

Eren puts a hand on his shoulder. "I uh... Armin I don't understand what you mean..." he mumbles, the look on his eyes remind Armin of a child whose candy was taken. It's disgusting. "Oi, why are you so touchy?" he growls and shrugs his hand off.

Eren pulls his hand back. "I am uh... Sorry." he whispers. "I thought you needed some help."

"Fuck off."

The woman covers her mouth. "He really has gone mad." she whispers.

Armin ignores her. He jumps off the bed and ignores Eren who wants him to lie down and rest. He runs out of the room without a clear destination in mind. The layout of the castle is still the same. So he runs and runs and runs, he feels Eren's footsteps behind him.

He runs until he passes from a window, time slows down as he notices something that is impossible to miss. Armin stops, almost stumbles and falls but he runs back to the window to stare at Wall Sina.

Yes, *Wall Sina* . In one piece.

The moment of hesitance is enough to make Eren catch up to him. Uncharacteristically, he stands up, just watching Armin. The view is so bizarre that Armin can't shake it off. Wall Sina is In front of him. Wall Sina. Impossible, he saw it get destroyed. He watched the titans inside it march to destroy Marley.

"The walls..." Armin whispers. "The walls are... In their place..."

Eren bites his lip. "Where else would they be?"

Armin glares at him from the corner of his eyes.

"You were never so detail oriented in the hallucinations you make, Eren." Armin chuckles, pointing at the walls. "What's the occasion, humor me and be done with it."

Eren's mind slowly becomes desperate, not understanding what his lover means. "Armin, I don't know what you're saying!"

"Huh? Did you make this so I wouldn't talk to founder Ymir?" Armin whispers, his lips spreading to a smirk. "Oh it must be! Tell me, Eren, what did she offer me that you had to go to such extremes!?"

"I don't understand what you mean!" Eren cries.

"Oh it must be that. Alright."

Eren grinds his teeth, fisting his hands and letting out a mad shout. "Armin, I'm going insane from these paradoxes-- what does founder Ymir want from you!? What's this mess all about a stupid deal Zeke says you've made!?" he shouts, finally breaking. "And don't you dare pass out on me like whenever I ask about it!!!"

"Pass out on you?" Armin chuckles.

But he can't ignore the exhaustion creeping up to his mind.

He's falling before he knows it, before he can make himself stand up again.

Eren catches him before Armin hits the ground and his eyes roll back into his head.

"You tried to manipulate me. Made me think Armin has made some deal with Ymir or something!" Eren shouted. "You pulled me to Marley, you're the reason behind all of this!"

Eren's shouting started the moment Zeke stepped inside Armin's room and where they kept the comatosed boy. And where Eren refused to leave his side.

Dina, who assumed it was time to leave the tensions in the past, wasn't expecting such a lash out. And she wasn't expecting this new information either. She arched an eyebrow, staring at her son and waiting for an answer. "A deal with Ymir?" she whispers. "... Is that... Even possible?"

"Doesn't matter." Eren yelled louder before Zeke could answer. "What matters is that I'm not trusting you with Armin! His grandfather

is dead and he has no next of kin. I'm courting him so I have the right to order you out! Out and away from him, Zeke!"

Zeke ignored his latest outburst and turned to Dina. "All the evidence points to it. He's made a deal with Ymir. For what and for what exchange I don't know. But I know he has already." Zeke says as a matter of fact. "Surely you've noticed he's come out of certain death, and stayed living with little problem."

Dina rubbed her chin. Her gray eyes matched the look of her sons. "You're right..." she whispered. "This needs investigation."

Eren gently put his hand on her shoulder and turned her around, he pushed her nonchalantly out of his room. "You can take your investigation and your son..." he said, pushing them out of his room. "... OUT!"

That day, when the nurse and palace doctor come to check the inventory and take the medicines they need for Armin Arlert, they notice the door is open. They shrug it off, thinking it's a simple mistake from the security.

The next time Armin opens his eyes, he's surrounded by medical staff in white dresses.

The moment Armin sits up, they waste not a single moment and ease him to sit up and ask him a thousand questions, he questions them with his fogged mind.

"What's your name?" Armin Arlert.

"How old are you, Mr Arlert?" I'm 19.

"Date of birth?" November 3rd.

"Name of your grandfather?" Oswin Arlert.

The doctor smiles a little as he ticks one box after another in his clipboard. "And what's your job Mr Arlert?" he asks.

Armin hums. "I'm a soldier of the scout regiment, if it exists anymore." he whispers the last part.

The doctor stops. He swallows hard and hums. "Want to think about it a little? What is your *current* job, Mr Arlert?" he asks again.

Armin clicks his tongue. "I'm a scout. I don't remember ever having a job other than that." he growls.

The doctor shakes his head. "Alright, what is your marital status? Social status?" the doctor tries again.

"Single. Commoner. I'm a soldier for crying out loud."

The doctor sighs at that. He turns to one of the nurses and orders her to give him a drug with a complicated name. The nurse immediately goes to make it on a table not so far away.

"What's the name of the queen?" the doctor asks.

"Historia." he says but then the doctor's face frowns and he sighs. "Fine. I don't know that lady. Who is she?"

"She is her majesty Queen Dina Yeager." the doctor pushes his glasses up. "And you, Mr Arlert, are neither single nor a commoner. You are queen Dina's advisor and quit being an active scout soldier about a year ago, but you're still one. You are courting prince Eren Yeager and that makes you royalty. Even before official marriage." the doctor shakes his head. "You might want to keep that in mind."

What Eren?

PRINCE!?!?

Before he can react to the news, the nurse shoves a cup into his hands. "Your medicine, sir." the nurse says, she hands him a cup of

clear liquid and urges him to drink it. Armin raises an eyebrow, wondering why he needs medicine but the angry doctor explains that his faulty memory is a result of a trauma to his head. This would help him if only he just drank it.

Armin does.

The doctor resumes to check his eyes, his reflexes, and makes him strip down to check supposed bruises he has sustained during his time in Marley. Again, Armin asks what does that mean but the doctor just gives him a strange look and tells him to ask 'Prince Eren' later. Armin just frowns and insists. In the end the doctor sighs and steps back.

"You came back from Marley heavily bruised and in a coma." the doctor says as a matter of fact. "Your face and upper torso was full of bruises definitely caused by a knife. Fingers were amputated and your face showed signs of severe beating and trauma, that's what I assume was the cause for your unending coma. you suddenly woke up two days after you came here after a cardiac arrest." the doctor explains. "It's all a shock to me. Your body healed the way a titan shifters does. I first assumed your fiance had used the founding powers to heal you but he showed up in the middle of your procedure."

... *That's...*

Some new information.

Armin hums. That's a lot of information to digest. Does this mean his face is disfigured now? He asks for a mirror and a nurse gives it to him. The person who greets him is definitely not the same person he saw in the morning everyday.

While he's staring at his reflection, Eren sneaks in and stands silently in a corner. He watches Armin with hawk eyes.

And his hair that used to be a soft and dark blond color, is now full of gray strands, Most likely due to stress. Armin long suspected that his titans kept his hair from graying out; he wasn't ready to confront the confirmation.

But the most notable change wasn't that his hair looks like a piece of stick and recently got rid of so many tangles. The most notable change is his eyes. "My eyes..." he whispers, looking at Eren's reflection through the mirror. "... Why are my eyes purple? It's a glitch in the illusion you've made."

Eren hums, Armin can read nothing from his expression other than he's being watched. With Eren, it's his new normal recently. The days when Armin could read him like an open book are long gone.

"That's the million dollar question. They used to be blue but... Changed gradually." He answers. "Don't you.. Remember that?"

"No. There seems to be a lot I don't remember or know." he whispers. "Or rather... Some people."

"People?"

Armin puts the mirror face down on the bed. "Well, take me to this new queen of yours." Armin says. He turns to face Eren fully. "Is she... By any chance... Grisha Yeager's first wife?"

Eren opens his mouth to say something, but decides to nod silently. His sharp eyes keep monitoring Armin's every single move. He shows the door and Armin decides to follow his lead.

They walk in utter silence, tense and uncomfortable but to Armin, this had been the normal with Eren for a year now.

Only Eren seems to struggle with it.

Eren takes him to a room on the top of the castle, what Armin recognises as Historia's room clearly belongs to someone else. With

that someone busy behind their work, whose face Armin doesn't feel familiar with, at all. "I need to talk to her alone." Armin says, his hands tightly fisted.

"Are you sure?" Eren asks Armin, he nods without looking back.

Dina nods at Eren before he can protest. "We need to have a talk. It's long overdue." she says. "I'll make sure to be more gentle with your betrothed than I usually am."

Armin flinches at the word, it doesn't slip from either of the eyes present. Eren accepts with a sigh. He steps back and just gives Armin one final look before he steps out. The doors close behind him but no sounds of footsteps follow. He's waiting, then.

Armin waits, he just waits and watches Dina's every movement closely, as close as he can get.

Neither of them speak.

If it wasn't for the sound of pen on paper it would have been deafening silence. By the looks of it, the papers don't even look relatively important but she's making herself busy with it regardless.

"It's all thanks to you, you know."

Armin has yet to get familiar with her voice.

It sounds mad. How did Eren not only grow to forgive this woman for *eating* his mother, but also accepting her offer of being a Prince. It sounds utterly mad. Eren would never.

Historia would never just stand back and let someone else reign queen.

Alright-- wait, how did she even survive?

Armin shakes his head and tries to focus back on the present. If he wants to slip out of the illusion, or whatever it is, he needs to play

along.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what that means." he says. "What is thanks to me?"

Queen Dina looks up and closes her folder. "It was a brilliant idea. Making Mikasa go to Hizuru and show herself. Meeting people independent of the Azumabito. It's thanks to this one that the allied west could find us. I can't begin to wonder what would have become of us if we were isolated."

What does she mean? Paradise is isolated. It's because of that that Hange couldn't form diplomatic relations. It's because of that that Eren felt like doing the rumbling. It's why they had to attack Liberio--

"We ARE isolated." he shots back.

"Perhaps we are. But we're working to change that. This war. Marley and the mid-west's I mean. It'll take long enough for us to make some sort of relations with the world." she says, she gently points at the chair in front of her. "Sit, Armin. Do you remember anything I said?"

Armin sits down.

It's strange how many plot holes there are to this new reality.

"I don't." he says and crosses his arms over his lap. "In fact, I remember other things entirely. That's what worries me." he says, adding some anxiety to his voice for good measure.

"About what?"

"You said the war between Marley and Mid-west will last a long time. It won't. Marley will win with the warrior unit." he recalls. "Very very soon."

Dina smiles. "Strange." she whispers. "You said this before too. Almost with the exact same words." she hums. "Do you like tea the

same way you did before? Jasmine or added with cinnamon?" she asks. It's spot on. Armin swallows hard and looks at the maid standing in a corner.

"Coffee please." he says, it's a test, just to see how much of this 'relationship' she described has actually proceeded. If they have coffee, then they certainly have to import and export with *someone* .

Dina nodes. "What happened to 'it makes me anxious' huh?" she whispers. "A Jasmine tea for me and some... What sort of coffee would you like?"

Armin narrows his eyes. "Turkish coffee," he says.

The maid nodes like it's the most normal thing in the world to ask. Armin's eyes widened. If they know all this then-- then perhaps Dina's claim of being in touch with the allied west isn't all that of a bluff. "You're strangely nonchalant about a request so bizarre."

"You just ordered something that cost two sleepless nights for you last time you had it." Dina recalls. "I'm not the bizarre one here."

Well, I've never had it.

Armin licks his lips. "Alright. I needed to talk to you." he whispers. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Language." Dina whispers. "And what's going on is that you... You gave yourself up to the Marleyans in an attempt to force Eren to move back to paradise after he disappeared in Liberio."

that at least, is familiar.

"I... Gave myself up?"

Dina nodes. "After it was clear Eren had really disappeared and wanted to face Marley somehow. You came up with this idea." she sighs. "I advised you against it but can't say I'm not happy it worked. You went to one of Marley's press conferences with the rest of the

world and screamed in front of all the reporters present that you were sent from paradise and paradise doesn't want war. They arrested you of course and tortured you, obviously." she moves her hands, pointing vaguely at Armin. "But Eren came back. So it's a good point... There are bad points that unfortunately outweighed the good for some time."

"Bad points?"

"The Marleyans had information that they couldn't possibly know unless..." he whispered. "Unless you had told them under torture."

Armin narrows his eyes at the accusation.

"Oh, and this." Dina searches through her drawer until she brings up a ring attached to a small silver chain. Armin recognises the ring immediately. It's Annie's ring. The first question that crosses his mind is what is that thing doing in her hands?

And then it strikes. Dina Yeager had to have eaten a titan to be human again, so she's a titan shifter and...

Who did she eat?

Whispers in his mind tell him she has probably eaten one of the warriors. And with the way she was staring at Annie's ring, Armin has a good bet.

Armin swallows hard. "Are you..." he licks his lips. "Are you the female titan?"

"Thought you'd never ask." she says and slides the ring near him.

"Yes I am. Yes, you already know that. We're over it. But you are not apparently." Dina narrows his eyes. "Listen, I'm not the kind to meddle with Eren's business but I've told you this before and I'll say it again." Dina narrows his eyes. "Don't bring a dead person between yourself and Eren, or buy the dire consequences. This... All this, has

taken a toll on Both yourself and Eren, you need to have a decent conversation about it."

Armin snatches the ring and shoves it into his pocket. "With all due respect to your majesty," he growls. "I don't think there is anything to worry about."

Dina ignores his last words. "Ymir is visiting the scouts. Namely private Connie Springle in the hospital today, do you remember him?" she asks.

Armin nods, Surprised that he is also here.

"Good, I'll tell her to wait until we're done with our tea and coffee--"

"No need." Armin shakes his head. "You already know I can't drink the coffee without *dire* consequences." he mocks.

Dina shakes her head. "All right. Go on. She has to be by the gate right now."

Armin makes sure the ring is secure in his pocket then stands up. He leaves the room with an automatic salute that makes Dina chuckle, so Apparently he doesn't do that normally. On his way, he bumps into the maid with the tea and coffee he was supposed to drink with the queen. Curiosity wins the better of him and he takes the coffee from the maids hands, the cup was small, too small. One smell from its rich aura is enough for Armin to understand he truly can't have one like this as his first coffee.

at least they really are in touch with the outside world, right?

Armin runs the rest of the way towards the open gates. It's evening so the sun is already setting, it's lazy orange lights moments away from disappearing on the other side of Wall Sina.

Ymir is in her own Scouts uniform, Armin feels slightly embarrassed by his plain clothes but pushes the thought away. He needs to do a

headcount of his friends present or not. Because there is no logical way for this. Ymis puts her hands over her hips, she takes a deep breath. "Where the hell were you? I was debating on going alone to check on that idiot."

"Sorry." Armin stops to catch up his breath. "... Which horse is mine?"

"Oi, do you even remember anything? What's the point in going if you don't remember anything." she asks as she points at one of the horses. "Because you got me into a lot of trouble. It's a shame you don't remember none of it."

Armin scratches the back of his neck. How is he supposed to interact with Ymie anyway? She has the same status of him if not higher considering Historia is actually royal blood and Eren was shoved into it. "I am uh... Sorry?" he tried.

Ymir pulls her gently to herself. "Do you remember that time in Utgard castle?" she says.

Armin wants to yank his hair out of his scalp and yell: *I WAS NOT IN UTGARD CASTLE !*

"No uh. I don't remember." he says instead.

Ymir takes a step forward. "You knew I was a titan, I don't know how the hell you knew about it all, but you did." she growls. "And you forced me to reveal myself. You took advantage of Historias self loathing and made me reveal myself to protect her."

I did?

Armin blinks on surprise. How is that even possible? He doesn't have future insight or something, how could he possibly know Ymir was a titan? He takes a deep breath. "Oh..." he whispers.

She rolls her eyes. "I'll try to kick start your memory later. That idiot Connie isn't doing well after Sasha died."

"Why is my uh... Memory important to you?"

"Alright, Alright, I'll change my vocab." she says, her voice menacingly low. "If this is another play of yours, you better stop it."

Armin blinks in surprise. Since he woke up, Ymir is the first person who thought he was playing, or manipulating. Armin swallows hard. "I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean..."

"Guess who has taken over your work since you decided to be a self-sacrificing martyr and left Paradise in chaos." Ymir whispers, grinding her teeth together. "*Historia* . She's the new advisor to the Queen. She's been doing all your work from negotiations to overseeing Paradises modernization. Talking to the Hizurans and diplomats and all these dangerous big words you're so fond of."

That's a step in the right direction.

She's the queen! She needs to actually do work instead of managing an orphanage.

"And why is it... Why is it that bad?" Armin asks, genuinely interested.

"Well, Guess who is going on a diplomatic trip to the west in two days?" Ymir growls. "Queen Dina wants someone who is good at Paradise's inner workings to attend it. It's the first one that Paradise is attending after all. The first time Marley and Paradise will be in the same political meeting. And guess who is attending!?!"

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line.

Diplomacy?

Impossible.

"Historia..." Ymir finishes for him. "You know that, don't you? That's why you've put up this show. For whatever sick reason you want her to go instead."

Armin looks down with a sigh. "I don't even know what's happening around me, Ymir. I'm not plotting anything." he says honestly.

Ymir opens her mouth to say something, then she just turns around and hops on her horse. "We're not done here." she says as a matter of fact. "Get up. We should get going."

Armin takes a deep breath.

"Ymir, Armin. Are you going to the city?"

Armin stops. The woman's voice was completely new to him, with just a hint of familiarity. He turns around just to give her a passing look, but that's enough to make him freeze.

There, stands Carla Yeager. Wearing all black and slightly more aged than the last time he saw her that fateful day in Shiganshina.

His jaw drops to the ground.

How far back does these changes go!?!?

why is she...

WHY IS SHE ALIVE?

And then, someone walks after her. It makes Armin's head spin because of course... Of course she's here too. She lets go of the horse and runs towards her. "Mikasa..." he whimpers and runs to her.

He jumps and hugs her frozen body as tightly as he could. "Mikasa! You're alive!" he cries again, burying his face in her shoulder.

Mikasa blinks in surprise, her hands slowly wrap around him as well. "There... There?" she whispers, not knowing what else to do. She lets him hold on as long as he wants to. Until it grows slowly awkward and Armin pushes back. He pushes his hands over his eyes and stops a hiccup. "I... I'm sorry I..."

"It's ok. Armin." Mikasa whispers with a bitter smile. "We all need it every now and then."

Armin shakes his head. "I uh... I feel..."

"Armin..." Carla puts a hand on his shoulder. "... I'm so sorry for your grandfather. May he rest in peace."

Armin's tongue turns to lead in his mouth.

"My... My what?" he mumbles, his eyes blown wide.

Carla looks down. "Your grandfather... He had a heart attack during the attack. When he was brought to the hospital it was already too late, he passed away a few days ago." she tells him.

Armin runs.

He doesn't understand what he's doing anymore, he runs until he's back in his room and the doors are shut. He leans against the rough wooden door and slides down until he's sitting on the ground.

Too much. This world is simply too much.

Armin grips his hair, pulling and pulling and pulling until his scalp hurts.

"What is happening!?!?" he yells silently.

If Eren wanted to make him lose his mind, he has succeeded.

"Thank you for accepting my offer, Carla."

In the morning light, a bird sings in it's perfect cage. Positioned right next to the windows and over Dina's office table. Slightly farther than they are now. There, Dina puts a hand over hers. "Eren needed you." she assures Carla, who refuses to look away from the windows. "We needed you."

"I assume I should be the one thanking you."

Carla breaks her silence. She holds the cup of tea with both of her hands, enjoying the warmth it provides in such a cold early winter.

"Don't mention it." The queen replies. "I'm counting my blessings. And having this wonderful tea with you is certainly one of them."

If Carla notices a strange taste in the tea, she ignores it.

Somewhere around a corner, Zeke Yeager smirks as he keeps walking away after making sure the women have liked their tea.

Unfortunately, when the sun rises again, the walls are still standing and Eren is pacing out of his room.

at least he isn't bothering me.

That's the first thought that crosses Armin's mind.

Armin huffs and kicks the blankets. Last night, he didn't have a wink of sleep. The cold reminded him bitterly that the time also doesn't align with what he remembers. The rumbling happened in the last days of summer but now it's early January.

Nine months before the rumbling.

Armin runs a hand through his face. No. No he can't keep going like this, he needs information. And he needs it now.

He starts searching his room, for a slightest clue of what this world is. Perhaps he kept a journal? That's the best piece of evidence he can find but Armin doesn't think any version of him has the patience to write a consistent diary.

Armin takes a deep breath and opens the drawer. To his surprise, there are some papers with royal signs on the top left, a stamp over them. He picks up the metallic object with utmost care and looks at the bottom of it. He can't make out the exact sign of it but it's there. Some crooked like that symbolizes the waves of the ocean almost perfectly. Under it, there is the royal sign of the castle, that he got from courting Eren apparently, and his name is written in both Paradisian and another language he can't decipher...

He narrows his eyes, more crooked lines are evident right under his last name. It looks suspiciously Marleyan, although he doesn't know how to read it.

So it was true.

He really is someone important.

Armin pushes the stamp into his pocket and moves on to the library. He finds a stock of newspapers that, to his surprise, are Marleyan and Hizuran. Some parts are circled in a bright red, important no doubt. Too bad he doesn't know how to read Marleyan or Hizuran. Armin puts them away, there is no point in spending his precious time on newspapers he can't understand.

He wonders how his alternative self learned it.

He searches his room and finds more questions than answers. Eventually, Eren pacing outside of his room stops and Armin feels free enough to sneak out.

He has to ask around for his next destination and Hope Eren isn't there. The guards reluctantly help him find Historia's room and knock for him, to his surprise, she is alone.

Armin steps in the open door after Historia allows it. The scene takes him by surprise, although Ymir told him about Historia's new responsibilities, it was still hard to believe she is actually participating in the reign rather than...

Armin takes a deep breath.

Historia doesn't budge. She's between large piles of books and angrily scraping on a piece of paper, then making it into a ball and throwing it away. Armin watches it with fascination. So she is actually capable of it.

"What?" she hums, not taking her head off of the reports and notes.

Armin closes the door and leans against it, his back to the door and making sure it's locked. He stares at Historia and takes in all that she's doing. He's never seen her behind a table and doing queenly duties before, so why is she so concerned now that she's just a princess.

Maybe it's Ymir's influence? Maybe it's Dina's? Only founder Ymir herself knows. Deep down, Armin is happy she's at least taking some responsibility now instead of spending all her time at the orphanage.

"If you're good enough to walk around, I'll gladly give all your responsibilities back to you." she says, then raises her head to meet Armin's eyes for the first time. "Do you even remember what your job was?"

Armin doesn't react. Historia, at least his Historia, knows better than to ask futile questions like this.

"Well, I didn't think so either." she whispers and her eyes fall back to her work. "Say what you want to say, I need to leave for a meeting with the queen and the court soon, what to come? Maybe it'll ring a bell."

Armin slowly shakes his head. "I don't think that's a good idea. If I really am an important political figure then I need to keep my appearance as such." he says.

She hums. "Yeah sure..."

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. "I need to ask for a favor." he says nonchalantly.

"What?"

"Tell me everything." Armin says, "from the day we met onwards. You're the only person who's words I can trust."

Historia tilts her head. "You can ask Eren?"

yeah sure. I'm not that desperate .

The taste of his betrayal is still bitterly fresh under his tongue. Armin still looks at Eren and does not think about all the pain he's caused and all the friends he's killed.

"We're not on speaking terms." he says instead.

"Oh really?" She challenges. "Listen, Armin, you need to--" Historia bites back her words and leans forward, her eyes dripping with the venom she wanted to say with her words. "Alright... Sit down." Historia rests her head against her fist.

Armin does, Her eyes follow him until they're eye level.

"Fine, I think the first moment that I actually acknowledged you was when..."

Everything that Historia said was insane!

Armin's mind becomes completely numb as he walks the stone walls of the castle. He covers his mouth and leans against the wall when

his vision starts to spin.

Historias vague recap of events are enough to make Armin wonder...

All this time, it's as if Armin knew what was going to happen and stopped it accordingly, or tried to. From Ymir's death to Trost.

Armin takes a deep breath, rubbing his head against the hard headache pounding in his skull. He rests his forehead against the cold stones and sighs. The pounding doesn't stop.

It's safe to assume the reason Reiner was the one who broke Trost and the explosion was all an indicator that Armin got rid of Bertholdt too.

insane.

legit insane.

Did I... Did I travel back in time or something?

"Armin... Is something wrong?"

Armin muffles a gasp. He straightens his back and nods, turning to face Carla with a smile.

"Uhm.. I'm ok." Armin says, swallowing hard. His eyes stare open and stunned at her, nothing in this world can make him believe Carla Yeager would just stand here in front of him in one piece.

Her eyes turn soft. "I just wanted to make sure you're coping well with everything." Carla whispers. "You know you can ask for help if you need something, right?"

A very disgusted voice in the back of his head disagrees. Like an aching hunger, bone chilling cold, and a desperate feeling Armin can't quite put. Armin tries to brush the feelings aside, perhaps the

remnants of his alternative self is protesting again. Something has happened that made him not quite trust the woman in front of him.

"Yes, of course..." he whispers, not knowing what he should address her by. Carla? Aunt Carla? Carla Yeager? Miss Yeager? Is she still a yeager?

"I uh... Good. Good." She sighs. "I'm glad you're back healthy. I'm sure Oswin can rest peacefully now that you're back home."

Yeah, that.

Because apparently, Armin was in the hands of the Marleyans recently. He did read the reports. He was missing his fingers and his entire body was full of small cuts. On top of that he was unconscious, perhaps because of some trauma to his head. That might explain why he remembers nothing, but it doesn't explain why the world around him is like *this* .

Against his better judgment, his mind saw the opportunity and went for it. He reaches out for Carla, the tips of his fingers barely touching her shoulder before she stops. Carla hums, silently asking what's his question with a grief-stricken smile to her face.

Armin pulls his hand back. "Uhm... I... Can you take me to my grandpa's uhm... grave?" he asks. The concept is so bizarre because nothing was left of him. Last he remembers is the old man putting his hat on Armin's head as he was drafted off to die. He can't have a grave, it's simply impossible.

And yet, a lot of possibilities have become possible the past few days.

Carla's smile turns even sadder. "Oh, of course." she says. "The public ceremony was a few days ago while you were still in a coma. But don't worry, Eren and I made sure everything was going smoothly."

Armin swallows hard

... *Sure* .

"Come, follow me." she says, "let's go."

Armin follows her blindly, from the way she asks for a carriage and the guards obey her without hesitation, Armin starts to think maybe she has some authority here too. But she probably isn't official, she stutters and walks in circles a lot, meaning it's all new to her.

Perhaps it's recent. From after the attack on Paradise? But that begs the question, who is she wearing all black for? Who is she grieving for?

Armin shrugs it off.

The carriage takes them to what Armin assumes is Stohess. He assumes because the moment he steps off the carriage nothing meets his eyes other than ruin, blood stains and the smell of death. Armin looks around, people search through the ruins and barely standing buildings for pieces of their belongings, perhaps to no avail.

Carla keeps walking. Armin follows.

"Where are we going?" Armin asks. He doesn't remember the layouts of Stohess as well as he remembers Trost, but still it's impossible to believe this pile of debris and uneven streets is the prestigious city of Stohess.

"Oh, we're going somewhere I'm hoping will kick start your memory. And we need to buy some flowers. If you remember, you'll want to take his favorite flowers to his grave..." Carla thinks out loud.

Armin just hums. For now, he's content in thinking his grandfather passed away long before this day.

She takes him to a building that is, surprisingly, in one piece. It collected some dust and the door was closed but broken. The

building was bruised by the war.

Arlerts bookshop.

Armin stares at the sign for a good few minutes. There were times in the limited time he had with the old man that he said he wanted to open a bookshop/library. Somewhere he could keep his vintage, and sometimes illegal, books safe.

And, this was my grandfather's dream...

Armin gently turns the handle and puts its lock. No surprises there. Carla stands back, watching his reactions with eagle eyes and not lifting a finger to help. Armin decides to take a gamble and flips over the mat with his foot, then hits the bricks with his heel and to his surprise, there is a dislocated one, and under it there is a key. Exactly where his grandfather used to keep his keys.

He presses the key to the lock with trembling hands, it fits. The door falls open with a loud crack. He turns around, wishing for Carla to give some explanation but she doesn't. "I'll leave you to it..." she says, the comforting hand placed on his shoulder slips away. Armin doesn't look up. "My restaurant's destroyed but I'll check there again. It's right around the corner on the left."

Armin nods automatically.

She's gone by the time Armin wills himself to take the first step inside and close the broken door behind him.

The place is darker than he expects, the large windows that previously could have lightened up the place with natural light have collapsed, and some parts of the bookshop are completely gone. A lot of books are on the ground, collecting dust and bending under the force of broken wood.

The first thing that catches his eyes is a framed newspaper on the ground, he picks it up and... Isn't surprised that his own face stares

back at him, next to Yelena and the rest of the Marleyan volunteers.

Paradise on the road of modernisation .

That was the title of the newspaper, Armin can't read the article itself because it's cropped out.

He finds a lot of them scattered around, an odd sense of warmth fills his body as he realizes they're his grandfathers, the old man kept everything about him framed to a wall and perhaps... perhaps showed him off.

Armin would have never guessed his alternative self appeared in so many newspapers. And his grandfather kept them all.

Unlike himself, his grandfather wrote consistent journals. So it's safe to assume he can get a good clue there. But where did he keep them?

Armin smiles bitterly. He walks over to his desk, and the moment the sound of his footsteps change, he knows it has to be under a piece of wood. He kneels down and yanks it off, his hands bruise a little but he doesn't care, he breaks some more until he meets a pile of books hidden safely in a box. He opens them, hoping it's the journals but instead, it's the illegal books his grandfather had and a letter is over them.

Armin .

The old man knew him too well.

Armin bites his lip. He has to remind himself that his grandfather died ages ago, that he doesn't have a grave or a legacy or even a happy life. And he has--

Armin picks up the letter against his better judgment and opens it. He leans against the wall, closes his eyes and lets out a deep sigh before looking inside of it.

There is a photo, a newspaper, and a piece of paper.

Reluctantly, Armin picks it up. Behind the photo it is written **Armin and Oswin Arlert, 853** . In the handwriting he doesn't understand. So it's perhaps the photographers.

It's a photo of himself and his grandfather. His grandpa was sitting on a chair and Armin was standing, a gentle hand on his grandpa's shoulder. The pale black and white photo was well kept, and Armin vows to keep it that way forever.

It's pathetic.

How Armin had forgotten what the old man looked like and now, the impossible had happened. Armin had a photo of him.

Armin stares at it. Part of him wants to set it on fire in front of Eren before killing him for putting him through such a cruel joke, the other wants to press it against his heart and weep. A rational part of his brain tells him there is no denying it now.

Whatever his alternative self had done, it had granted his grandpa 10 extra years of life. Where he had a bookshop and a life and a grandson he was proud of. Enough to show him off to his customers.

The newspapers came next, this time Armin felt more terrified than ever.

Royal advisor in the Marleyans hands,

A leap of faith far greater than what we imagined.

Last week, the news hit Hizuru and the world's headlines. For the first time in one hundred years, Paradise had talked to the outside world in Marleys conference with representatives of the world. This dangerous duty was given to Armin Arlert himself, who was arrested shortly after and the whereabouts are still unknown. These events

were government secrets until they were revealed in yesterday's "path conversation" as the public has named it, in which the founding titan has threatened Marley to return its ambassador. So far, no reaction from the marleyan government has been recorded.

Power of the titans vanished, The founding titan at fault.

As of December 27th, no titan has appeared in the continent of Marley, exactly as promised by the founding titan.

After Marley refused to free Paradises ambassador, Queen has forfeited the Eldians of Marley their right to titans powers. What does that mean for the prestigious warrior unit? Well, for one, Marley is deprived of its pride and joy and has lost the battle in the front lines several times since that day. Royal castle still refuses to give a statement about Armin Arlerts location or whereabouts.

Armin folds the newspaper away.

Before he can regret it, he opens the letter.

Dear Armin,

By the time you read this letter, there is a high chance that I have passed away.

Last time I saw you, you were smiling. Your work has always been secretive and of course you are a loyal person and wouldn't speak to me about it. But when you walked into the bookshop with a smile on your face and told me it was your day off, I thought things were going smoothly for you. I have to say, it broke my heart after I found out it was your last day in Paradise before you went to Marley on that dangerous mission of yours. It was normal, like most days you leave the capital to come here. We spent it by discussing the latest news,

political matters and books we've read or not. I asked about Eren and the princess but you quickly changed the subject.

I assume this letter is going to be my last words to you, my final goodbye. So I'll tell you what I've always done. I believe in your strength, Armin. if you had to leave and do that to yourself you had a good reason for it, even if you didn't want to discuss that with me.

I am watching you, and I'm proud of you. No matter what happens from here on out, remember I can never be more glad to have you as my grandson.

Live well, my son,

-Oswin Arlert.

The call for help shocked Eren to his core. Although Dina had warned him that mass healing with the founding titan will not work with everyone, he was shocked to find out one of those people had been Armin's grandfather, Oswin Arlert.

According to what his doctor said, the old man had a heart attack during the invasion and was buried under the rubble. Although the founding titan revived him from the brink of death, it does nothing to keep him from tumbling back to that dangerous zone.

So Eren decides to pay a visit. He knocks and goes in after the old man allows it. He's laying on his bed, near the window and staring out of it. "Mr Arlert, is everything ok?" He asks, sitting near the bed.

The old man nods weakly, he turns his head back to the window and looks out. "It's a lovely day, isn't it?" he says, although he knows neither of them can let the signs of early winter take the forefront of their mind.

Eren presses his mouth to a thin line.

"Whatever it is... You're not allowed to tell me, are you?" the old man says.

Eren's stares at the back of the old man's head. He doesn't say another word, just continues to watch the view.

Eren licks his lips. "Yeah..." he whispers. "The doctors told me I shouldn't give you... Disturbing or emotional news."

"Then don't. It's about Armin, right?" Mr Arlert turns his head, his eyes completely emotionless. "... Is it positive or negative news?"

"... It's Neutral." Eren whispers back. "I'm doing everything I can to find more information about him."

"Look at me, Eren." the old man says, his wrinkled hands squeeze Eren's with the little force it still has. "My days are numbered, I... Don't have much time left."

"No." he says. "We healed everyone with the founding titan. you'll be fine. Don't think like that--"

"I can feel it." the old man smiled bitterly. "I won't be there when Armin comes back. I-- I need you to promise me- promise me something.... Just bring him home. Promise me, you'll bring him home safely. That's all I ask."

Eren nods, "I will. I will do that. I promise." he vows. "There is no force on earth that can take Armin away."

Oswin Arlert takes a deep breath. "I always thought this enthusiasm of yours was bad for Armin..." he sighs. "You two make a pair..."

Eren can only squeeze the old man's hands in reassurance.

"... Go now..." Mr Arlert whispers, his voice suddenly growing quiet as he clutching his left shoulder. "I bet you have... Have a lot to do... Lot to do..." the old man's breathing became elaborated.

*"Do you need anything? I can ask for your transfer to the castle."
Eren offers as he stands up.*

Oswin Arlert turns his head back to the window, a small smile appears on his lips. "No. I... I am... I'm ready for it." he says, and Eren doesn't understand what's going on in the old man's brain.

He stands up and says his goodbyes. He repeats his promise, He catches the corner of his lips going upwards, a tiny motion. Eren leaves with a newfound determination to get Armin back from the Marleyans.

He doesn't step outside much, when there's suddenly a nurse shouting and two other nurses running to the room he just came out of. Eren's eyes widen, he stares back, frozen in place. He stands there until the shouts dissolve into nothing.

The nurses carry a body, fully covered in white sheets, out of the room.

Eren takes a deep breath.

He has nowhere to go but onwards .

"Tell me the truth, doctor." Armin murmurs, his head hanging low.
"Why did my grandfather die?"

Finding a doctor that could give him answers was easy.

He simply had to walk into the Stohess hospital, the only building standing in town, and wait until someone recognised him. Which happened very soon. A nurse took him to a waiting room and when Armin asked for anyone who could give him answers about his grandfather, this young doctor appeared.

She looks at the nurse next to her, her eyes darting between Armin's and the clipboard in her hands. She steps in and grips Armin's

shoulders firmly. The touch makes Armin finally raise his head.

"Your grandfather led a stressful life. Such effects make themselves known very later in life." she explained.

Armin fists his hands over his knees. "In other words, The stress was too much on him." he whispers.

"More or less, it's quite common with the older generations of soldiers. And some are just simply prone to such diseases." she says, then clears her throat. "I would actually recommend you to get checked out. You see?"

"Me?" Armin whispers.

"Yes, you are his grandson. You should take care of yourself since your job is stressful too. More than his." the doctor offers.

It's hilarious to him, Armin doesn't plan on finishing his twenties, let alone sixties and seventies. He thanks the doctor too quietly, she doesn't hear him and walks out.

Unfortunately, the nurse isn't the only person who recognises him.

"Wait-- is that Arlert? He's back?"

"Poor Mr Arlert, that old man died before they could reunite..."

"Can you blame him?? The news of the boys torture was melting my stone heart. Of course the boy's grandfather would have a heart attack hearing it!"

"But that man had such a grip on life! He wanted to stay alive until his grandson arrived safely. Man, if I was in his place, I would have died long before that."

"No, I heard that's a rumor. He died before that or... Did he?"

"What sort of son is he? To put your grandfather through all this when he has a heart condition."

That is the last strike to Armin's already wavering judgment.

He runs out, the only place in his mind is the graveyard Carla talked about. The one she mentioned that she and Eren made sure is done smoothly.

Armin runs.

It doesn't take a lot of time to find the graveyard/memorial/cemetery.

To his surprise, he isn't alone.

A few feet away, Connie and Ymir are leaning against a grave. Connie holds up a beer and is too deep in retelling a story to Ymir to understand Armin is standing right there. Ymir too, she's hollering and too busy giving smart comments to notice him.

Armin watches them, it's bittersweet, knowing the grave between them is meant to be someone. Then it clicks who that someone might be and Armin's heart twists.

Sasha .

Armin watches them until Ymir stands up, she cracks her knuckles and offers Connie a dinner on her. "My last lunch on the island." She says. "Historia and I are leaving this afternoon. It's on me. Let's eat some damned meat for this potato girl right here."

She offers a hand and Connie takes it, standing up to his feet. "Oh yeah." he laughs. "I wish I could come with y'all."

"Nope. If it calls for it, I'm taking Historia and leaving everyone behind to die. No one gonna pull an Armin on Historia." She threatens. "You stay put in Paradise. Hange needs you too."

Connie rolls his eyes. "Yeah sure, let Historia enjoy her scary dog privileges." he mumbles.

Their conversation continues until it fades into nothing. Until Armin can't hear an echo of what they are saying. He walks over to Sashas grave. It's just as he remembers it, Cold and silent.

He wishes he had some flowers.

Sasha Braus is on the 'B' part of the cemetery. And from what he has heard there were over five thousand casualties from all three cities combined which were left to rest here in Stohess. Apparently, this part of the city was leveled to the ground and the easiest to transform into a graveyard. If he wanted to find his grandpa he had to search the 'A' part. So he has to move left alphabetically.

Brandon

Brana

Bocharest

Bodt

Ba--

Armin stops in his tracks. He turns back, stunned and reads the grave he just passed.

Bodt, Marco.

NO NO NO NO.

Armin covers his ears and shuts his eyes and keeps moving. He's had enough surprises for today. What's next? Levi squad!?! Did they survive too just to die in Marley's latest attack?

The attack that was never supposed to happen?

Because...

Because...

Eren stopped it.

Eren disappeared in Liberio, Killed Willy Tybur and pulled them into a battle they were not ready for. But Marley took a huge blow and that delayed whatever they were planning. Eren's attack on Willy Tybur stopped this.

But Armin Stopped Eren.

And now five thousand people are dead. Shiganshina, Trost, and Stohess are leveled to the ground, never to be habitable again for a long time.

These thoughts cloud Armin's mind until it's numb. Until he's standing on the grave he came here to find.

Alert, Oswin.

Armin falls to his knees.

"I'm sorry..."

His voice breaks.

Armin buries his face in his hands in front of the graves. The graves seem to stretch into the endless horizon, making it so painfully obvious the number of the people who died in Marley's invasion.

This right here.

This is what Eren had stopped. This is what he wanted to stop when he attacked Marley on his own and would have dragged the scouts into it. Armin's lungs fail to take air into his lungs other than short, ragged breaths.

Well, even if he has known the future, it's too late to change anything now when so many of the people he wanted to protect are six feet underground.

Armin stands at the edge of the cliff.

Under his feet, there's an endless distance between the ground and where he's now. If he falls or jumps, certain death awaits him.

According to various reports and eye-witnesses, he has come back from the grave before. What's one more?

"How the hell is that even possible?" he whispers as the breeze dances over his skin. everything Zeke and Eren said turns into a madman's story with every passing second.

if you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

His grandfather's words echo in his mind.

One way to find out.

He steps backwards until his back hits a tree and he's far away from the cliff.

Armin shuts his eyes.

He runs. Runs, runs, and runs until he reaches the cliff and has to swallow his fears to jump.

He flies for a moment.

His heart drops to the ground before his body does.

His grandfather is probably ashamed of him now.

"Tough night?"

Eren runs his hand through his face, he covers his nose and mouth and shakes his head. "I've been worse."

Historia watches the workers move their suitcases into the ship. Even at night, the air is dense and humid, warmer than what Eren is used to. However, he's not letting them go without a proper goodbye. He smiles at her. "I'm going to miss you Historia," he says. "Look out..."

Historia shakes her head. "It's just a week."

"I would have come with you if Armin-"

"You're the founding titan. You need to stay here." Historia says simply. "And you need to keep helping Armin, he'll come around eventually."

Eren shakes his head. "He's been pushing me away and mom told me to give him some space."

"Well you shouldn't have.." Ymir growls. She walks over to stand next to Historia. "He's running around Stohess. I caught him lurking aimlessly in the cemetery, it's good for no one's mental health."

Eren rubs the back of his neck. "I'll talk to him but for now..." he looks at both of them, "Ymir, Historia... Best of luck." Eren nods. "Dina and I will your backs with the founding titan, I swear it."

Ymir chuckles. "Please don't. Had enough of watchful eyes as it is." She throws her hand over Historias shoulder and pushes her into the ship. "Alright-- let's just get over this stupid mission."

Eren waves at them as a short goodbye.

"Your majesty."

Historia almost doesn't hear the maid over the wind. She's too busy rubbing Ymir's back as motion sickness makes her throw up her breakfast over the sea. "There there..." she whispers, "Do you need more medicine for that?"

Ymir straightens her back, just to cover her mouth and lean down over the edge of the ship again.

"Your majesty, some medicine for the motion sickness. For you." the maid says, this time Historia turns to her. "This will help with motion sickness." the maid offers a cup to her, it's a deep green color that Historia has never seen.

She arches an eyebrow. "Motion sickness?" she wonders. "But I'm not motion sick. She is."

"It's wise to prevent such a thing from happening." the maid says, her voice small and mouse-like. Historia shrugs, after she starts to feel dizziness in her head, she thinks maybe the maid wasn't wrong.

She drinks the bitter medicine, and just like Ymir, she gets instantly better.

Despite the fact that he was only here once, Armin recognises it immediately.

He gasps awake under the glowing tree and over the white sand. Handful of white sand is poured over his body until he crawls back, his blue- violet?- eyes stare wide eyed at the man in front of him.

Eren.

Eren, older and wiser and with his long hair pulled back into a bun. "Hello there." he says. "I was hoping you wouldn't show up here again."

When Armin doesn't answer, Eren sighs. He sits back and lets the rest of the white sand fall into the awkwardly familiar cardigan and shirt. "Before you start... it wasn't your fault." Eren tells him. "Don't accept guilt from what wasn't your fault."

Armin's senses are too numb to be feeling anything. Hearing Eren's words...

They sound...

They sound odd, like falling sand over the gentle waves of the ocean. His voice is deep but gentle. Firm but kind. Armin can listen to him talk forever. But Eren isn't a talkative person when it comes to feelings.

Or anything that isn't currently that far fetched goal of freedom he was trying to achieve.

Armin's eyes branch at the stars of the paths.

The blond reaches up for them, as if he tried hard enough, he can touch those lights. He knows it's not a star, just a branch of the tree that is far enough that looks like dots instead of a branch. Armin can't help but think of a free night next to the ocean.

Jean and Eren would fight again. Armin and Mikasa would try to separate them while Connie laughed at them all. Sasha and Marco would come with hands full of picnic material and snacks to feast on in the afternoon spend at the beach.

The waves will hit the shores.

They might even make a sand castle...

And then...

And then...

Armin's eyes tear up and his vision blurs. This won't happen. It won't happen because the entire nation is in mourning of five thousand casualties. People who lost their lives.

They can't because Sasha and Marco are currently resting underground, in a public goodbye ceremony neither of their parents could get themselves on time to attend.

Just like...

Just like the world Armin remembers.

Armin's hand covers his face and wipes at his eyes angrily. He won't cry, not here. Not with Eren who is still unclear which version of Eren he is. Although he's partially sure it's Eren from the other timeline. The one who killed the world and his friends.

Because there is no other explanation of how calm he is.

Armin pushes himself up to his elbows. "Who the hell are you?" he asks, finally. For once in his life, he wants direct answers. He wants the world to tell him the answer instead of throwing a puzzle at him. He looks at Eren's dead serious eyes. "Who the hell are you?"

Armin narrows his eyes. "Tell me." he growls. "Why am I in that world!? Why don't I remember anything!?"

Eren takes a deep breath. "You don't remember because I wiped your memories... I thought it would be... Easier for you to deal with the consequences." he says. "And you're in that world because you created it. You made a deal with Ymir to go back in time--"

Armin's hands fall to the sand.

It was true.

He really did go back in time.

He fixed- or tried to fix- the world around him.

And utterly failed.

"You have no right to keep my memories from me!" Armin yells, blood pounding in his head. "Give them back-"

"Your job is finished, Armin." Eren tells him. "Believe me, when the time comes, you'll thank me for not making this harder on you than what it already is."

Armin barks a laugh. He grabs his abdomen and laughs until his stomach hurts. "You don't get to dictate anything, you understand!?" he says. "It's you, isn't it!? You're the Eren that went with the rumbling. You're the one I remember!"

"So you think I'm different than the Eren You know? You think of us as different. What if I tell you we are not?" Eren asks. He reaches for Armin's hands and pushes them away, he adds the finishing touches in the form of skin against his pale organs. With a flick, Armin's skin appears normal and healthy.

Armin ignores it. "You are different." He insists. "This Eren is more rational than you. He's obeyed far more commands from superiors than what I saw that you obeyed in your entire lifetime."

"Did he?" Eren challenges. "Or did he do that just because you were the one telling him to." Eren taps his chin. "As memory serves, I've a solid track of listening to you, too."

"He didn't run off to Marley and dragged us into war!"

"Oh, are you sure about that?" Eren narrows his eyes again. "Because the amount of time I spent healing you back when those bastards tortured you to death is out of count! Why did you give yourself up, huh? To stop him from running off and destroying Marley."

Eren chuckles.

"And look what happened!" there is an inevitable challenge in his tone. "Every single soul you tried to save from Annie, Reiner and Berthold is now dead! Along with countless other civilians!"

Armin grinds his teeth. "You! You of all people don't get to say shit about my decisions!" he shouts. "Your plan killed more people than mine!"

"More Marleyans--"

"And more innocent people!"

"Are you ok with those innocent people being paradisiacs?"

"Shut up! Of course I'm not!"

"Your actions speak far louder than your words do, Armin."

Armin jumps to his feet and grabs Eren by his collar. His fingers dig into his clothes. But Eren doesn't stop talking. "Would you be ok if one of those paradisiacs was your own grandfather?"

"SHUT UP!"

"I put some thought into it too. Do you think I just said 'fuck it' and went to destroy the world?" Eren chuckles. "I had you, Mikasa, Jean and Connie. I had Historia back there, who was so crucial that could not be separated from the Eldians. I had all those children in her orphanage and all those people who didn't want to die. I considered running away with Mikasa, because I knew you wouldn't. And I gave her all those memories, did you know, Armin? We lived four years here in the paths in a reality where the two of us ran away."

Armin laughs, painfully. "And where did I go in that reality? Even more so that you don't particularly care for me or anyone around you."

"That's why it was all a dream. And when it finished, Mikasa refused to do it. She refused to kill me and the rest is history." Eren sighs

loudly. "I got side tracked, what I meant was that I had people here that I couldn't abandon. I did what I assumed was the right thing to do. And I did the same thing when Ymir threatened me with you."

Eren put his hands over Armin's, to ease his grip and let him relax. "The only difference between us was that you would chose The world over Paradise but I would chose Paradise over the world." Eren says, not missing a beat. "But it's hard choosing when your loved ones can be directly affected, right? Back then, you didn't have your grandfather, so it was easy buying the risk of a war in paradise. Now though... It was a challenge wasn't it?"

Armin growls angrily. "Shut up."

"I know regret, Armin. Stop trying to hide it."

"How can I regret it if I don't remember!!"

"No, Armin, if I give you back your memories, you'll spend the rest of your days trying to put that few days of torture behind. I don't want that for you." Eren says sincerely. Slowly Armin's hands lose their initial force.

"Give them back. Since before I went to Marley, then." he bargains. "I-- I'm so confused. It's the least you can do in all this."

Eren sighs. "Fine, I'm keeping that part from you. But I warn you, the moment the powers of the titans disappear, the memories will return."

Armin raises an eyebrow, but doesn't say anything. Eren puts two fingers over his forehead.

It feels like an electric current. Right into Armin's temple.

Armin falls to the white sands of the paths, his vision swims and so do endless pictures in front of his eyes.

He holds his hand up, watching a few glowing branches from between his fingertips. Then he lets his hands fall into the white sand, spreading eagle.

"Get me back to the real world. I'm done with you."

Eren complies.

"Armin!"

Armin mumbles a little, he massages his eyes with his hands but his body is squeezed in a tight hug the moment he moves.

"Armin, uh, please-- don't do that to me again!"

Eren's voice makes his mind slip back in place. Armin looks up, and just as he thought, he meets Eren's eyes. The jade green slowly softens and he lets out a pained gasp. He lets Armin sit back on the ground between large trees.

How did he get here?

Uh, he jumped off a cliff.

"I was just exploring..." Armin says dismissively before Eren can ask. "Why do you care?" he adds automatically as he slaps his hand over his mouth.

No, not you. Wrong Eren.

"Why do I care!?!"

Eren grabs him by his shoulders and shakes him roughly. "Armin, I die everyday! I died everyday when you were gone!" he yells in the blonde's face. "Since the moment I heard you were arrested to the day I held you, I couldn't breathe!"

Eren stops, he pulls Armin closer and rests his head on his shoulder. "I couldn't breathe!" he whispers. "I know you don't want me near you but please-- I don't-- I thought you jumped off a cliff! That's what the eyewitness said."

Eyewitness?

Armin swallows hard and smiles awkwardly. "They probably saw something wrong..." he whispers. "Eren I... Remember everything."

That's enough to shock Eren into silence.

"Are you... Ok?" he asks.

Armin nods. "I'm uh... As good as I can be. I don't remember much about Marley, still..."

"Maybe that's for the better..." Eren nods. "Come on, let's go back to the castle." he stands up and Armin does too. Armin holds on to Eren's shoulder. His fingers slip until Armin's holding Eren's sleeve. But he does, he holds on and doesn't let go. It makes Eren stop, not being able to take more than a few steps away.

Eren sighs. "Let's go." he whispers.

"Can you carry me?" Armin mumbles, his violet eyes pleading. "I have a... Very bad headache."

Eren can't refuse. He nods strictly and picks up Armin bridal style like he weighs nothing. Armin hooks his hands around Eren's neck and buries his face in it. "Thank you..." he whispers against his skin.

Eren opens his mouth to say something but decides to let Armin drift off to a pleasant sleep in silence.

Nobody asks Eren why took the longer route to the castle when he gets there.

That next morning, when Armin is sleeping soundly in Eren's bed, a note comes with their morning tea.

A note from Zeke Yeager.

Eren picks the note and opens it. Strange why Zeke would bother with a note when he could come in person. Deep down, Eren is glad all the threats with that dagger have finally paid off. Curious, he reads the note.

He immediately drops the cup of tea, it shatters on the ground with a loud sound that makes Armin stir in his sleep.

Armin, your mother and Historia have all been infected with my spinal fluid in the past 72 hours. At any given notice, I can turn them into titans and order them to kill themselves sooner than you can think of stopping it.

They are the most important people to you, am I right?

Meet me tonight in my room before midnight and leave your dagger behind.

-Zeke

Some of y'all suspected Zeke, you were right not to trust him xD

My twitter: @ [Rose_lily_sun](#)

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Return the kids to their parents.

Chapter 28: Return the kids to their parents.

waves awkwardly

Well hello! Sorry for being MIA for the past 3 weeks. The finals were killing me and well it's not all fun and games around here anyway.

Man, I couldn't wait to get to the good parts so I kinda skipped through some parts just to get to the Angst and the eremin faster the next chapterssss sooo bear with me.

Anyway, hope you enjoy.

WARNIING

WARNIING

character death, blood, gore, threatening. All canon typical.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Two weeks ago,

"Lady Ackerman, do you need any--"

Mikasa can't hear her. Not when another bile rises to her throat and the familiar bitterness stings her mouth. She bends over the toilet again, throwing up everything in her stomach.

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. She's been feeling dizzy ever since she had given in and joined the tea party with Carla

and Dina. *constantly* . It became unbearable when she came to visit Jean in the hospital and she hasn't been able to leave the toilets.

She sighs. "I'm alright..." she says to the nurse outside. "Just... Just-_-"

It takes an hour. By the end of it, Mikasa is throwing up blood. But it's as if a key was turned off. She was fine. She stood up, testing her mind's ability to keep her upright.

Mikasa pulls her short hair back. "What was that?" she whispers to herself. All the symptoms immediately leave her mind. "Food poisoning? But I didn't eat anything."

She washes her face with cold water. Splash after splash of cold water on her skin. She leans against the sink, taking one deep breath to calm herself down.

She rarely gets sick. Maybe she has to visit the doctor?

She opens the washroom door and her senses tingle immediately. She turns around, and not surprisingly, spots none other than Zeke Yeager in a poor disguise standing between the crowd.

Old anger rises. She moves before she thinks about it. Zeke tries to walk away but Mikasa is faster. She grabs him by his collar and pulls him into an empty room nearby. "What?" she spat angrily.

Zeke stumbles inside but quickly gathers himself. He fixes his coat and then crosses his arms behind his back. A deep disappointment is in his eyes. He hums. "So you really are an Ackerman... That's a shame... A Lot of things won't work on you."

"I'll show how much of an Ackerman I really am if you stay here. More. *Second*..." she growls, her hand falling to the weapons she keeps in her persona. The last thing she wanted was Zeke in close proximity to a comatosed Jean.

He's the reason Jean was like that in the first place.

Zeke immediately raises his hands in defeat and slowly steps away.

Kenny Ackerman has seen a lot of mischievous plots. He's seen a lot of assassination attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, be plotted in front of his eyes. He was the active party in so many of them.

He'll admit, Zeke Yeager was a good one. No wonder he was the 'boy wonder' of Marley.

He's been watching from afar. He watched as Dina grew closer and closer and dared to dream of a normal relationship with her son.

Kenny pushes his fedora hat up.

In the throne room, Dina laughs very loudly at a memory Zeke was telling her. A rather fun mother-son bonding if the whole ordeal wasn't reeking of one plot or another.

The small flinch of Dina's maid, her small murmurs, the way she (and every other servant of Dina's) avoids Zeke is not a good sign. They fear Zeke more than they should, and obey his little orders with stuttered words and stumbling steps.

This boy is up to something, and he's using the people around her to get it.

"Thanks for coming, Captain Levi, sir."

Levi kneels down to get closer to the scene of crime. The door of the infirmary was wide open when the nurses arrived. Nothing was amiss, a few needles and syringes were missing and the patients in there had reported sightings of a masked person at night.

Levi glances at the nurse from the corner of his eyes. "So just a few needles and a broken drawer?"

"There weren't just any syringes sir, they were Commander Hange's titan syringes. The kind they created to extract titan serums." the nurse says, a little shy. "We suspected nothing at first because nothing we worked regularly with was missing. But then you ordered to report anything titan related. So here we are."

Levi hums.

He's been following that bastard Zeke for a while now, since that bearded man stepped foot on this island. And now...

What was he up to?

Levi grinds his teeth as he leaves the infirmary.

Historia calls herself a realist.

She's long past the stage of forcing herself and people to look at the full side of the glass even if it's just a few drops of water left. *sometimes*, the glass is empty, was the first thing she told herself as the ship hit the shore and they slowly stepped off of it.

The stares the people gave her were new, they kept themselves a few steps away at all times, the workers whispered behind her back and the hotel staff wiped clean everywhere they went and assured the others residing in that luxury hotel that the place no longer has any Eldian stain.

It bothered Ymir more than it bothered her, Historia expected it. Dina, and Armin's notes, made sure she knew exactly what she was doing by taking this trip. Her job was simple, make sure Paradise has a voice in international relations, no matter what that entails. After all, Eren did a partial rumbling to buy this seat from the Allied midwest.

Which brings her here, constantly ignored by her peers.

Ymir says it's a good thing that they don't open their filthy mouths. Even their so-called "allies" refuse to acknowledge them.

But it's ok,

Historia thinks to herself.

because the most important man here can't ignore me.

The moment he steps inside the conference hall, a stunned silence washes over everyone available. Not only is she the only woman present, but she's the only Eldian. Eyes look at her the moment she steps in, Ymir walks forward, warding off the angry glares with a version of her own until Historia is seated in her own seat.

"Last time I checked, this country doesn't exist in the free world."

Historia lifts her head from her notes. Ah, so the man is finally here.

Of course, Willy Tyburs words are followed by a loud applause. A round of slurs, new words that Historia has to add to her vocabulary, are aimed at her.

And all it does is to make her smirk.

"Oh, Paradise was *invited* here." Historia says as a matter of fact, holding up her card around her neck. "And I can see the empty spot where PA is supposed to be." she says, nodding down at the post card of *Paradise* over her table.

Willy Tybur, or Lord Tybur as everyone refers to him, simply walks forward. "Well, I believe the first matter we need to discuss here is banning paradise from this meeting." he says as a matter of fact.

"Nice start." she chuckles. "Why, may I ask?"

"And you have the audacity to ask why?" Willy shakes his head. "Your mere existence is a threat to us all. To us all, the entire world. The rumbling you uh so generously used not even a month ago, can threaten to destroy the world. In fact..."

Willy turns to a few men standing on her opposite. "I believe the Allied forces should be held responsible too, for using the rumbling in their war. For it's far too cruel."

Historia shakes her head. "Let me refresh your memory, Lord Tybur. Paradise Publicly announced the partial rumbling and its path. Marley evacuated the area. I can show the total number of your military casualties in one hand. And Civilian casualties were none! Because what we targeted was a war zone!" Historia says. "Not even a few days before the partial rumbling, Marley launched an attack on Paradise. On three main cities that had little to no intervention with your war. You--" Historia points a threatening finger at him. "--Killed over five thousand people."

"You can't seriously compare." Willy smiles. "Eldians in paradise can hardly be counted as people."

The response strikes an odd emotion deep down her heart. Is he trying to tempt her? Make her angry so that she'd say something she'd regret?

"And besides..." Willy holds his hands wide, almost inviting. "We were in the right. I bet if Marley hadn't attacked, You would have gone full rumbling and killed everyone."

Another applause.

Historia looks at them, baffled at how deep this hatred ran. This was wrong. Neither of the representatives here were Marleyan. They are all kinds of people with different nationalities here to protect their benefit--

Historia's eyes widened.

And currently, that benefit lies in pretending Eldian lives aren't worth anything. Historia can't win their sympathy over. This isn't going to work unless...

An idea sparks, with no other choice, Historia goes with it.

"Is that so?" she asks. "How often do you pretend that the lives of your enemies aren't worth anything? Is that your strategy? Is that why you used the same Titans you're preaching against in battle for *so long*?"

Historia laces her hands together.

"Your existence here is a mistake, Guards!" Willy yells. "Maybe if we dispose of this woman, the Eldians will know better to step foot outside of their island next time."

"Ah, correct. Because you *dispose* of all your enemies alike."

"You Eldian wrench can't say anything when your History is oh so full of blood and cruelty."

"Ah please," Historia rolls her eyes. "I bet in the past 100 years, Marley has gotten even crueler."

"Silence!"

"You preach and preach and preach. What's the difference, May I ask?" Historia says. "Doesn't Marley and the allied west have an arsenal capable of destroying the whole world three times over?" Historia arches an eyebrow. "And you're comparing the very likely scenario of a war with Marley with the Rumbling? You yourself have here explicitly mentioned was a bluff." she says, pointing at the man. "You thought it would be a good idea to drag Eren Yeagers name through the mud. Name him the devil while praising King Fritz with the same breath!"

Maybe Dina's hatred for the Fritz bloodline is rubbing off of me .
Historia thinks bitterly.

this is pointless. Historia realizes after a few minutes. Willy Tybur has some excuse ready for me no matter what I say.

it's ok. She reminds herself. I'm just here to show myself. It's Hange's job to establish the diplomatic relationships we need.

Historia looks away from the corner of her eyes.

and I sure hope they are doing better.

"Yeah that's more or less what happened." Historia shrugs, lowering her hands to the table. "Of course, Willy Tybur still had something to say back to me every time. But I think I did enough. Hange managed to talk some of the more *reckless* businessmen into agreeing to visit paradise. Who knows, maybe they'll give into all this risk. Paradises fuels are very profitable after all."

Eren hums, he can't be happier to be away from these political games. However, since this is a small celebration dedicated to Historia's return, this conversation was inevitable.

And Dina insisting on everyone being present is just nauseating.

Dina sits on the head of the table, with Zeke on her right. Historia and Eren sit next to each other with Ymir and Armin next to them respectively. What shocked Eren this morning was that His mother attended the feast too. She has been avoiding Zeke like the plague but now she was present, sitting right next to Dina and a small encouraging smile on her lips.

She was wearing black from head to toe, it was enough of a sign.

Armin yawns loudly, although he tries to cover his mouth and look away. Eren hears it. He puts a gentle hand on the blond's shoulder.

"Armin..." he says. "Do you need to go back?"

Armin rubs his eyes, the large black bags under his eyes speak volumes of how tired he was. "I've been sleeping for a few days now..." he whispers. "I can stay up for lunch."

"You just got your memories back, take all the rest you need." Eren urges. "Lets--"

"Eren." Armin smiles, tiredly. "I'm ok. Historia did my job for me. The least I can do is to stay at her welcome back party."

this is barely a party. Eren thinks in his privacy. No, Not with Zeke and Carla present in the same room. His mother is showing unbelievable patience. This all looks like Dina's desperate parade to make sure people in this castle stick together.

"That was wonderful, Historia." Dina raises her cup, a genuine smile on her face, "Never has the throne of paradise stood on firmer grounds! I am sure you will be a perfect queen when the time comes."

Historia smiles and just nods.

Eren shakes his head, Dina is strangely nonchalant when talking about her own death. Armin raises his glass regardless, Eren mirrors his action.

"With Marley occupied until the foreseeable future, We can continue our plans in peace." Dina declares.

Zeke is the only person still skeptical, he spins his wine and rubs his beard. "I'm afraid I don't understand why you're so sure the war between Marley and The midwest will last." he says as a matter of fact. "Once Willy Tybur asks for another cease-fire. It will happen."

Dina smiles. "Oh, Don't worry, son. He won't even dream of it." she whispers. Then turns to Eren and winks.

Ymir scoffs. "I don't even want to know."

"Neither do I..." Historia whispers back. "Eren, make sure I never find out about the messed up things you do with the founder."

"Messed up? You're alive because of that..." he teases back.

Armin sighs. "For the love of god, not this conversation again." he mumbles as he rubs the bridge of his nose. Eren doesn't get to answer because he's interrupted by the maids who bring the food. Historia smirks to herself.

Carla smiles at Historia, although Eren knows she doesn't know or care about half of what Historia did. "That's wonderful, Princess. I've heard you like beef stroganoff, I tried to make some but I don't know if it's the way you like."

"Nonsense! Anything you make will never be less than mouth watering." Dina adds with a smirk.

Historia elbows Eren, an eyebrow raised. "She's happy today..." she whispers quietly so that only he could hear. "What's the occasion?"

"I have no idea." Eren answers, his eyes focus on the charming smile on Dina's face. "... Whatever it is... I don't like the way she's talking to my mom."

Historia rolls her eyes. "She's being friendly. Dina just wants your mom to feel welcome at the palace."

Eren hums, staring wide eyed at Historia. "Then maybe that's why I'm the only one seeing it."

"I'm surprised Zeke has a seat here... Did your mom forgive him?" Historia asks. "What happened? So much has changed. I was gone for like a week."

"Two weeks." Armin corrects, looking over from next to Eren. "And stop whispering, it's rude."

Eren laughed awkwardly. He puts his hand over Armin's and squeezes it reassuringly. "Sorry, Angel." he whispers. "Are you feeling ok? Any headaches?"

Armin takes a long sip from his drink. "Not yet..." he mumbles. "But I'll ask to leave when it comes, Don't worry."

A sharp jingle sound echoes in the room. All their attention shifts to Dina as she raises her glass of wine. Her smile is from ear to ear. "I have someone else to thank as well. Hange has reported well, in fact some of our gas tanks have already been shipped off to the rest of the world. I would like to thank Zeke for all the information he provided us with that made Hange's work much easier." Dina smiles at her son.

Zeke smiles back.

"I'm glad to have you in paradise, my beautiful, smart son." Dina ruffles his hair, in a manner a mother would do to their child. "Where would I be without you?" she whispers.

Her voice is quiet, but it drums behind Eren's ears.

His eyes stare at Dina, without meaning to. Zeke has had his effect on her. She's been much happier and easy going since Zeke has come and yet...

Eren grinds his teeth together.

The wine glass shatters in Eren's hand. The wine slides down his hand the same way his blood does after the broken glass broke his skin.

That night, Eren barges into Zeke's room, he kicks the doors open and the guard standing in the hallway rushes in. Zeke was sitting behind his table at the time. He merely looked up and excused the guard.

Eren grabs his so-called brother from his collar and yanks him from the table. He pins him against the wall, his knuckles turn white. "What DO YOU WANT FROM ME?" Eren yells in Zeke's face, tightening his hold on the man's collar.

Zeke smiles. "Oh dear brother, what I want is quite clear, don't you think?"

Eren grinds his teeth. His hand tightens around his so-called brother's collar. Zeke put his hand over it, not an ounce of fear in his eyes. "Be careful what you're doing, Eren." he warns. "You don't want me to scream for help, do you?"

Eren's hands froze.

He lets go of Zeke's body as if he was burning up. He steps back, he balls his hands into fists but keeps them on his sides.

Zeke fixes his coat, he goes straight to the point. "What I want is simple. You've known my ambitions from the start, so you shouldn't be surprised." Zeke says, an eyebrow arched. "I was hoping we could settle this without involving your mother, lover or friend but here we are."

Eren points a threatening finger at him. "Don't you dare even think about it!" he yells.

"Oh it's much passed the thinking stage." Zeke hums. "You know my range is pretty impressive. Almost 100 kilometers! Can you truly get them this far? All three of them? Can you sacrifice one of them? Or two of them? Tell me, Eren, can you choose which one you'd--"

"SHUT UP-" he yells. He holds up his hand. "Alright, what do you WANT from me?"

Zeke's face melts into a smile. "I want to save us all."

"By making everyone infertile?"

"Precisely." Zeke nods. "I know my mother and our father have influenced you a lot. So I understand why you don't see the world I do. But one day Eren..."

He reaches for Eren's shoulder but Eren steps back, glaring daggers at his half brother.

Zeke pulls his hand back, unaffected. "... One day I will save you from their brainwashing. But first... I need to finish the plan I came up with my true father."

Then Zeke looks at his closed fist. "Before I get to the paths... I need you to kill my mother." he says.

Eren keeps his face neutral but he can't stop the color from leaving his face. "You want me to... What?"

"Kill my mother." Zeke says. "I don't care how. I want her dead. Can't risk you reversing everything I've done with her, after she's gone, I'll be the only titan of royal blood. That'll give me enough time to put a version of the will of the king myself. So that no one can reverse what I've done."

he's crazy--

"You have two weeks, Eren." Zeke says, a hint of urgency in his voice. "The time won't extend."

And from that two weeks, only two days remain.

Eren tried, he really did. But in every corner he thought about double crossing Zeke or telling Dina, he thought about how frighteningly easy it was for Zeke to carry out his threat.

On the other hand...

On the other hand, Dina isn't an easy person to kill. If nothing, Eren will be sealing his fate with his own hands by killing her and let Zeke be the only titan of royal blood around.

And with Historia at his mercy, his hold over the founding titan is guaranteed.

A double edged sword, Eren thinks. He's failed before he has even started. No wonder, he expected nothing less from Zeke's endgame.

Much like everytime in his life, whenever he felt conflicted, his feet took him to his mother's kitchen. At first, he wanted to pack and go to Stohess before he remembers there is no Stohess or Trost anymore. These days, Carla is staying in the castle kitchen and donating her food to the countless refugees there.

Eren sneaks into the kitchen silently and decides to watch from afar as she moves in between the maids and cooks. She chats with the few of them minimally, no one would bother a grieving woman wearing all black.

Eren crossed his arms over his chest and looked away.

A few hours pass, and Carla notices him. Of course she does, and she makes it known by asking him to taste her stew. He does, and tells her it needs less seasoning. He earns an eye roll from her.

By the time she closes the cauldrons door, the entire kitchen is filled with the smell of her food. She smiles at Eren, small and bitter, as she cleans her hand with her apron. "I thought you wanted to spend the day with Armin today!"

"I did." Eren nods. "Ever Since his memories returned, he's been with endless headaches and tiredness. I let him sleep in today."

Carla shakes her head. "Poor soul..." she mumbles. "Do you want some tea?"

"... No."

"Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"No. But I'm full..."

"Really?" She arches an eyebrow. "Eren, if you're here to check up on me, I'm ok..."

Eren rubs the back of his neck, awkwardly looking away. "I just wanted to make sure of it."

Carla hums. "You've been here for almost an hour. I told you, I'm alright." she whispers. "Keith wouldn't have wanted me to stay mourning like that... Anyway..."

Eren hums.

She says she has tried to move on but she's still wearing black from head to toe. She's still extremely hostile when Zeke or Shiganshina is mentioned, and Eren can't blame her.

She doesn't know about the spinal fluid she has drunk, or else she would have had another reason to worry.

Without any reason, Eren opens his arms and crushes her in a bone-crushing hug. Tight enough to calm the hurricane in his own mind.

Carla freezes.

Eren hugs her tighter.

Slowly, his mother buries her face in her shoulder. Her hands grip the back of his coat until her knuckles have turned white. Her body starts to shake.

"I'm ok..." she whispers.

Eren doesn't believe her.

He gets his answer.

Eren has to wait.

If he is to murder the queen like that, without anyone noticing it was him, he has to wait until she's after dealing with the recent news from the midwest.

Which is, not surprisingly, a proposal for another deal, the partial rumbling in exchange for some land this time.

Eren fists his hands. The courtroom is complete. The MP, scouts and garrison heads are all present. Zeke is too, Eren wanted to see the face of the poor person who had to tailor a Paradisian military suit for him. Dina sits on the top, she opens the letter handed to her by Hange with little hesitation and reads it again, quietly and to herself.

"It seems to be another proposal with *apparently* mutual benefit." Hange recites. "The Midwest has fallen back on their borders with Marley again. They request another aid with the partial rumbling. With it, they plan to advance further into Marley. In exchange, they offer the mostly Eldian-residue area of Liberio."

Neither Eren, Nor Historia, miss the glint in Dina's eyes. Zeke on the other hand is completely neutral, Eren can never hope to read his emotions from his completely stoic face. They meet eyes, he clears his throat, *almost* mockingly, and Eren looks away.

"They believe because Liberio has a lot of Eldian population it's of value to us." Hange says loudly. "Intel suggests another aid with the rumbling will do a lot in their favor. Perhaps even turn the ties in this war."

That's bad, Eren knows Armin and Dina have put a lot of faith in Marley (or more accurately, the world) to be preoccupied with this war. There is no point in helping the allies win it if it's not in Paradises favor, according to that train of thought.

Dina turns to Zeke, sitting next to her on the high chairs. "What do you say, Zeke?" *should we go home?* Goes unsaid.

Historia and Eren exchange a look from the corner of their eyes.

Zeke clears his throat, the mask of happy obedient son slips into place so beautifully it would've fooled Eren if he didn't know any better. "They are taking desperate measures. Due to its proximity to the sea, and being the only port in the gulf of Liberio, it's an extremely strategic port for Marley. The midwest wouldn't have offered it so genuinely if they weren't desperate, or..." he pauses. "They are bluffing."

"Statistically speaking, that's possible. But I believe Even the Midwest fears the power we hold with the rumbling. It wouldn't play with us like this." someone from the MP says as a matter of fact.

"Whatever happens, please take the effect it has on the walls and nearby cities in mind." Rico, the new garrison commander, says. She pushes her glasses up and narrows his eyes at Eren. "The last time, when your titans returned into place, they crushed more than a handful of houses and froze all in the wrong spots. If we hadn't evacuated, we would have had more casualties than Marley."

Eren nods. "Duly noted," he says. "I will take all you said into consideration. As we all know, ultimately this choice falls on me. I will--"

Eren doesn't get to finish because the doors open with a kick, they hit the opposite walls and make the biggest cracking sound these walls have ever heard.

Armin marches forward, his bed head still on with casual clothing. It makes Hsitoria's jaw drop that Armin is showing himself in such a state. "ANOTHER ONE!" he yells before Dina can address the situation. He holds a threatening finger to her, her eyes narrow angrily at her. "*How dare you!*"

Dina opens her mouth to say something, it quickly slips into a smile. "How about A breather? It's a break for thirty minutes, we need to have a talk."

The military doesn't hold back on their poisoned glares. Armin stands completely still on his spot, never backing down from his eye contact with Dina. Until the doors close with a loud thud and Dina, Zeke, Historia and Eren are left alone with Armin.

"What..." Armin hisses. "... were you thinking? Even considering it is--"

Dina puts a hand over her chest. "/ am doing what is best for Paradise. What are *you* doing here like-- like this--" she whisper-yells, pointing at Armin's untidy appearance.

"No. You and I both know how abusing the power of the rumbling will end in!"

"Uh!? Do enlighten me what part of this is an *abuse* of authority." Dina challenges "Liberio and all the other internment zones of Marley will become a part of the nation of paradise. This is all benefit." Dina waves dismissively. "I don't care what the midwest allies do with the rest."

Armin grabs his hair. "That's what I meant!!" he pulls his blond hair out of his scalp from frustration. "Another rumbling, seriously!?" Armin shouts. "The first one was bad enough. And you want to do it a second time."

Dina arches an eyebrow. "It'll barely cost us anything." she offers. "We'll use the same colossals we used the last time. Just a little more help from wall Maria, just in case Marley is prepared for it. Then, Liberio and the internment zones will be ours."

Eren can feel Armin's skin heating up, anger rising to his chest. Armin balls his hands into fists. "NO!" Armin yells louder. "Do you even-- it's the rumbling!"

"Partial rumbling." Dina reminds him.

"How many times is it going to remain the partial rumbling!? How much longer until it's the full one!" Armin screams.

Dina blinks in surprise. "Armin? Do you hear yourself?" she sighs. "Are your memories foggy again?"

Armin steps back, offended and stunned. "No. What? Just because I oppose this *stupid* idea doesn't mean I've lost my mind."

This has gone far enough.

Eren tries to move but a gentle grip on his shoulder stops him. Historia shakes her head.

On the other side, Zeke witnesses with curious eyes.

Dina rubs the bridge of her nose. "Armin..." she sighs, the crown on her head falls forwards, out of place. "The torture has effected you far too much Armin. We've done this before! We've won. And Marley is in a worse situation than before." Dina sighs. "Listen to me. There are thousands of Eldians in the world we can do nothing for. But somehow, there are about three thousand people in Liberio that we can help." Dina summarizes. "Besides. Think of it this way. With good migration management we can even fix the population problem we have here in Paradise. Win-Win."

"WHAT? No. It's not worth it. No matter how you look at it, it's not worth it. What the hell are you going to do with Liberio anyway?"

"Save the Eldians." Dina says as a matter of fact. "In fact, they are in desperate need of saving."

"They'll reject your reign. Certainly." Armin shakes his head. "This is stupi--"

Eren stands between the two of them, his hands up and looking directly at Armin. "How about we all catch our breaths?" he says. "I

think we're going in circles. And the final decision of doing or not doing the rumbling is on me, not either of you."

That happened to be the last nail in the coffin.

Armin's eyes blow into two full circles. "You-- you were--" he stutters. His hands fall to his side and his eyes slide closed. His breathing stops and immediately, Armin loses his balance.

"Armin!" Eren catches him before he can hit the ground. He cradles him close and gently hits Armin's face. "Armin, open your eyes..."

Armin groans, his eyebrows frown and he hisses under his breath. "I'm ok..." he whispers. "Just... Tired..."

He presses the back of his hand to his forehead, his breathing gradually aggravates. Eren holds him closer. He picks him up in a bridal style. "Historia, the doctor--"

"I'll call him." she nods. "You get Armin to his room. The doctor will be there shortly."

Eren nods. He pushes Armin's head into his shoulder. The blond's body goes limp, feverish skin against Eren's. He ignores Dina and the others, and how stupidly his actions confirm Zeke's suspicions, and carries Armin out and into his room.

Eren tucks him into his bed, Armin whimpers but otherwise doesn't open his eyes. He falls asleep before Eren can ask him how he feels.

typical...

he's been like this since he got his memories back...

Constantly asleep, or passed out.

Eren takes a deep breath through his nose. He gently pushes Armin's hair out of his face, and gently presses his forehead to

Armin's feverish face.

The doctors appear as fast as Historia promised. She herself is standing outside of the room. Eren closes the door with an angry thud, he crosses his arms over his chest, not offering a word. Ymir arches an eyebrow, waiting for Eren to say something.

"... he passed out again." Historia concludes. "Does the doctor want to change his medicine?"

Eren shakes his head. "I don't know. What I do know is that Armin doesn't want to. I think he's in denial. About..." Eren sighs. "... Everything."

Ymir chuckles. "Relax, you look like a depressed bear."

"What?"

"I said you look like a depressed bear. With all the worrying and all." Ymir says, vaguely pointing at Eren. "You're running around Armin like a butterfly. And all this worry extends to others too just--"

"I'm just worried..." Eren interrupts. "The matter of this... This deal Zeke mentioned isn't settled yet... And Armin doesn't even stay awake enough to really do anything. What if what Zeke said about a deal was true... A Lot of Zeke's conspiracies turned out to be true..."

Eren's eyes fall on Historias.

Armin, your mother and Historia have all been infected with my spinal fluid in the past 72 hours. At any given notice, I can turn them into titans and order them to kill themselves sooner than you can think of stopping it.

They are the most important people to you, am I right?

Meet me tonight in my room before midnight and leave your dagger behind.

-Zeke

Like this one.

He swallows hard.

Historia presses her mouth to a thin line. "Well, would you like to be distracted?"

"Distracted?"

She nods. "I'm transferring the kids from the military to the palace dungeons."

That answered none of Eren's questions. "Kids?"

"Their names: Gabi, Falco, Udo... And *Zoofia* ." she smiles. "... I like the last one."

Historia rolls her eyes. "I thought you'd like Gabi but here we are..."

"Gabi?!? Nah, she reminds me too much of our fellow here to talk to her in peace?"

Eren holds his hands up. "Alright, Alright. I feel like I'm missing out on a lot of things. What the hell are you two talking about?"

Historia waves dismissively. "I'll explain to you on the way. But we need to move, they'll be here at any moment now." she urges them. With nothing better to do, Eren leaves Armin in the doctor's capable hands and decides to follow them.

"Since I'm running an orphanage. Dina told me to deal with the little wayward child soldiers." Historia says as they walk. "I was going to move them to the orphanage but then one of the girls, Gabi, attacked

a guard. Watching the fight alone was enough to make me realize these kids aren't ordinary."

"I could have told you that..." Eren whispers.

"Anyway, moving on, Ymir and I have been visiting the four kids regularly and last time we decided it was time to move them to the castle's prisons and not hold them in a military base because..."

Historia sighs.

"Anyway. So they're being moved and under my direct watch. They should be here any moment now." she says. They walk over to the palace grounds and the gardens.

The winter weather is cruel to them. Historia holds onto her coat as tightly as she can. It doesn't take a lot of time until a carriage makes its way towards the palace.

And then--

"LET US GO! YOU FILTHY BLOODED--"

Gabi yells and cries and struggles in a female MP's hands to get away. The poor MP officer's hair is out of place, her clothes askew and her eyes dangerously narrowed at her. She doesn't open her mouth and just bears Gabi's words.

Then comes Zoofia. Her eyes suddenly light up when she meets Ymir although her facial expressions remain relatively cold and stoic. She has a guard that simply has a hand over her shoulder, unlike Gabi who was physically restrained. Ymir waves at her. "... Told ya it was temporary." she says.

Zoofia nods.

Then Udo walks down, similarly to Zoofia, his guard isn't strict. Udo squinted his eyes, his glasses long lost in the battle. His eyes stay

on Eren for a while until they blow wide. "Are you--" he gasps, then bites his tongue.

Historia hits her palm to her forehead. "Ah, I almost forgot! An optometrist is coming this afternoon for your glasses Udo."

Udo recovers from the shock. He shakes his head and says: "with all due respect, you can't make my glasses with your technology."

"Stop calling us primitive. At least we can try." Ymir shots back. "Alright, where's the last one?"

Eren's eyes met Falcos.

Falco immediately pales.

They stay staring at each other for a good few minutes, until their attention is broken by yet another yell from Gabi.

Historia's eyebrow twitches. Eren knows the telltale signs of her patience slipping away. "Keep them in the palace dungeons." She instructs them. "... Keep the kids safe. I'll be there shortly."

The guards salute him.

"YOU BASTARDS-- even if you've won you haven't broken THE SPIRIT OF MARLEY, IT WILL LIVE ON."

"Gabi..." Udo hisses between his teeth.

"I need to ask again, Princess, Are you sure?" The MP holding Gabi asks again. "These four are the only members of the Marleyan forces left. It's not wise to keep them so close to the throne."

Eren narrows his eyes. "What are four kids going to do?" he says.

"KILL YOU!"

"Gabi, FOR GOD'S SAKE!" Udo growls under his breath. "Now is not the time."

Gabi glares dagger at her friend. "Why? Because I need to tolerate them now? Because I'm a filthy prisoner of war!?! " she yells, obviously quoting her friend. "Well I won't! I won't forget all these island devils have done! All that they're ancestors have done!"

"Ah, why do I even bother?" Ymir chuckles. "If you're going to repeat the words of your superiors like a broken record, I don't see a point in trying to talk rationally to you."

"You..." Gabi grinds his teeth. "And I don't want to talk to a filthy thief like you! You stole the jaw titan from the Galliards! You killed Mr Porco's brother!"

Ymir rolled her eyes again. "Ah, here we go again. You really want to count the dead--"

"Ymir..." Historia says softly. "Take the kids. Get them to the palace dungeons--"

"And YOU!" Gabi's guard fails to keep her steady. "You're the reason behind all this, how dare you parade us around like this. One day, I'll kill you MYSELF--"

"Alright- I've had enough!" Ymir yells.

"Take them away." Historia orders.

"No wait!" The voice comes from Falco, who'd stayed silent until now. He turns to Eren, olive eyes staring at Eren with a purpose. "You're Yeager, right!? The founding titan!" Falco yells and stands his ground. "What happened to my brother! You'll know, tell me, what happened to my brother?" Falco yells, he shrugs his guard's hand off as he tries to show him the way.

Eren looks at the guards. "Stop, please." he orders..

The guards obey him.

"It's true. I'm the founding titan. And I'm the one who turned your brother into a titan." he says, Falco immediately pales. Eren walks over to falco. His guard steps back immediately. Eren kneels down to be eye level with Falco. "... Queen Dina doesn't kill one of our own." he says, relaxing his face into a smile. "If your brother wasn't killed by the Marleyans, he's still alive as a titan."

Falcos eyes widened with equal measures of hope and fear, he takes a step closer to Eren. "You can... Turn him back right? You're the one who has the founder, so you can turn him back, right?"

Eren's eyes softened. "I... Will try." he assures him. Then, he arches an eyebrow, he takes a good look at Falco's face. "Wait... How did you know I was the founder?"

Falco looks down. "It was..." he swallows hard. "It was... Some of the information acquired from Armin Arlert."

Oh right, sometimes he forgets Armin broke under marleyan torture. His name and whereabouts is the least of their worries when it comes to information Armin has let slip.

Eren opens his mouth to say something, but he's interrupted with a loud clicking sound coming from the end of the hallway. Then a bang. Gabi's guard falls to the ground.

"Celine!!" a guard yells. Gabis guard remains motionless on the ground.

Another clicking sound.

Gabi aims her guns, her guards' guns, towards them. Eren barely has any time to react. Ymir runs to Historia. It takes a moment for him to realize who Gabi was aiming for, and shoots. Ymir tackles Historia to the ground.

"HISTORIA!"

Another click-click sound of the gun can be heard, Eren raises his head and the pistol is aimed at his own face.

Mikasa appears behind Gabi, hitting the back of her head with his hand with enough force to knock her out. "Gabi!" falco gasps loudly but the other warrior candidates are being held back.

On the ground, Ymir slowly tries to sit up, but fails and falls off. Historia again, her body starts to tremble. "Ymir?" Historia whispers. She feels no pain, hopefully Ymir's quick thinking saved them both. "Ymir--"

In that moment, Ymir rolls over. On her back, her eyes tightly shut. Historia's eyes widen, she bites back a scream at the blood pooling on her sides. "CALL A DOCTOR!!" she yells, forgetting Ymir was a titan shifter. She undoes her scarf and uses it to put pressure on her wounds. She holds Ymir's hand with her own.

Eren runs to Historia and Ymir. "Historia, you alright?-- Ymir--?" he bites back his words.

Ymir doesn't respond, she holds on to Historia's hand and nods silently. "I-I've been better." she grinds her teeth together as the wound starts to steam. "Don't-Don't be dramatic. This-- this ain't gonna kill-kill me now."

Historia squeezes her hand back. "Hang on..." she says, smiling encouragingly. "The medics are on their way."

Two guards appear, they take the female guard Gabi has shot moments before and quickly move her to the infirmary.

"Oh no, we're going there." Mikasa shakes her head. "Get away, I'm the strongest one here, I'll get her to the infirmary."

Historia opens her mouth to protest but slowly moves back. Mikasa picks Ymir up, she hisses but doesn't protest. Historia keeps holding on to Ymir as Mikasa runs to the other side of the castle.

"Move the children to their rooms."

"What should we do with her?" Zoofia's guard nods at Gabi's direction. "We can't seriously consider putting her in the luxury of the castle."

Eren hears a growl from the ground and notices Gabi's body slowly starting to move. He grinds his teeth angrily. So Mikasa hasn't exactly knocked her out. He walks to her and kicks the gun out of her hand.

He kneels down, he meets Gabi's vengeful eyes although they were unclear. "Listen, *brat* ." he growls. He pulls her to sit up from the back of her dress, and to make her see him eye to eye. His fingers tear the back of her clothes. "You better pray to whatever god you pray to that this woman doesn't die. Because I don't care if you're a kid, if you tried to murder my loved ones I'll make sure you're in prison until your hair is as white as your teeth!" Eren spits angrily. Gabi tries to punch him but Eren grabs her hand, and her hold tightens until she's screaming and pulling her hand back.

"Don't try me." he growls and let's go.

He leaves immediately when the guards arrive.

"Does it hurt?" Historia asks, she never takes her eyes off of her own hands.

The bullet has pierced a part of Ymir's spine, meaning her titan healing alone couldn't heal her.

Gabi had aimed to kill. She'd pulled the trigger to kill Historia and make sure she died. If Ymir hadn't jumped in the way...

Eren can tell the truth. Hange has experimented on his titan attributes before and anything remotely near the nape of his neck or spine was intensely painful.

Eren presses his mouth to a thin line. "The healing?" he asks. "No. It's not bad when you're used to it... Which I'm sure Ymir is."

Historia buries her face into her hands, then slowly shakes her head.

"Hey, she's a titan, she'll be ok." Eren tries. He sits next to her, smiling as gently as he can. "You should--"

"Why did you hurt Gabi like that?" Historia snaps instead, "she has a hand shaped bruise on her hand now, parades around with it and shows it off. Now she has an excuse for shooting Ymir."

Eren blinks in surprise.

"Listen, Eren, I understand you're going through rough times right now. I get it. You lose control of what you do and say when it's stressful but-- don't take it out on the wrong person!"

Oh, Historia... You have no idea?

Eren's eyes soften. "Like you're doing right now?"

Historia bites her trembling lip, her head falls forward and covers her eyes.

"She'll be fine." Eren says again. "Even if something does happen, we'll just run to Dina and use the founding titan to the best of our ability to heal her" he assures her.

Eren says yes to the rumbling.

When Armin hears the news, his face falls and something unbearable breaks in the blue of his eyes.

"Phew! I don't want to make a habit of this-- this sounds truly exhausting."

Those are Dina's first words when the real world materializes around them. This event went just as smoothly as the previous one. Marley was given one day in preparation, of course, many of their troops stayed. They were stomped and they lost about ten colossals due to external damage and heat.

Overall, one would point this as a strategic win.

too bad it is going to be our last one .

Eren swallows hard.

Dina turns to her library. "I want to map out all the places we saw. And uh, I'm so tired. How long were we in the paths? One day, two?" she sighs. Dina pulls a rolled paper from her shelves and spreads it over her table. She taps her chin. "Eren, so where did we see that huge volcano?"

Eren looks at the ground. "I don't know."

The dagger hidden inside his sleeve pulls him down with his unimaginable weight. Dina smiles and shakes her head. "Clumsy child, what happened to all the hyperfocus you had last time?"

Eren fists his hands on his sides as they start to shake.

Dina arches an eyebrow but doesn't question him. She turns back to her library. "Oh, I want to do so much with Liberio!" she stares at a book cover, a fictional one. Her enthusiasm stops the fatigue from their time in the path show. "I want to redesign it entirely! Of course I need Zeke's help with--"

Eren visibly flinches at his name.

"Oh dear-- I might even see some old neighbors! Hah, look at me running my mouth, it's unlike me isn't it?" she whispers the last part,

and opens the book.

Eren lets the dagger slide into his hand.

His jade green eyes lose their color.

"Heh, you're really quiet, Eren. Are you tired?" Dina looks at her from the corner of her eyes. "Go get some rest. Silly me, of course you need some rest. You--"

Eren hides the dagger behind him. "It's ok," he says stoically. "It can wait. We're on a mission right?"

Dina narrows her eyes slightly. "Right... You never really cared about Liberio, what changed?"

Eren shrugs, although it looks like his shoulders spasmed. "... Since now."

Dina hums. "Well, in that case. I believe we need to start by introducing ourselves fully. As strange as it sounds, a whole group of people are loyal to Marley in Liberio." she says and turns to her library again. She searches cover to cover for a certain book. "There was this one journal from an Eldian king that went through a similar situation. Hopefully that'll help me with it."

Eren licks his lips.

He takes one more step forward, the dagger feeling heavier than any burden he's ever carried.

A tight hand grips his right hand, the one holding the dagger and holds up his hand. Something covers his mouth, a wet piece of cloth. And Eren gets hit in the back of his head. It all happened simultaneously, Eren didn't even have time to make the slightest sound.

The hit was hard enough to make him see stars-

-And Captain Levi's face, right before he passes out.

"I was thinking we should return the kids to their parents. A sort of good will. Armin agrees too but he's messed up in the head these days." Dina says out loud as he sorts through her library. "We're going to discuss this in court tomorrow, the representatives from Trost and Shiganshina are very hard to convince. What do you think, Eren... Eren?"

When she turns around, she finds herself alone in the room.

Eren wakes up on a cold hard ground. He groans as he tries to sit up, pushing himself up to his hands and feet.

He recognises the tiles as the castles, but the room he's in is dark and dusted enough not to be a room with much life. Why is it here? Did... Did someone find his plans?

Was Zeke leading him to a trap all this time?

"Finally. I was starting to think she gave you brain damage."

Levi's voice clicks something in Eren's mind. He turns to the voice. His breath catches in his throat.

On the other side of the room, all the Ackermans glare down at him. Mikasa sits on some unopened boxes, disappointment written all over her face as she clicks her tongue. Levi looked at him, neutral, while Kenny played with the same dagger Eren was planning to murder the queen with.

He swallows the lump in his throat. He sits up "What? Is this some sort of Ackerman conference or something?" he mocks.

Kenny laughs, Mikasa rolls her eyes. "Zeke made a bad decision by making every single one of us his enemy." Kenny chuckles. He holds

up the dagger Eren had been carrying and smirks. "You picked a good one, great shape. Perfect for... You know..." he makes a show of slicing it across his own throat.

Kenny throws the dagger in the air and makes a show of catching it again. "Real good one. A shame it was going to be the weapon to kill the queen, I might have picked it up for myself from Dina's cold corpse, you see?" He looks at Eren from the corner of his eyes. "Because I bet you're stupid enough to leave the dagger in the crime scene too."

Mikasa rolls her eyes, muttering something unintelligible under her breath.

It's Confirmed, they know. It takes Eren by surprise, how calm the three of them are acting, considering he was moments away from assassinating the queen herself.

It's Levi who finally speaks. He steps closer to him, kneels down to be at eye-level again. "I've been monitoring Zeke the moment he stepped on the island. I gotta say, by the time I noticed what he was up to it was too late to stop Armin, Lady Carla or Historia from drinking any of that poison."

Eren's eyes widened. "You knew!?"

Mikasa frowns. "Yes." she pushes her hair away from her face. "He tried to poison me too." Mikasa says, pointing at herself. "Didn't work, I ended up throwing up and was deathly sick until it was out of my system. I was with Jean at the time so Kenny checked the food and waters over in the hospital. Turns out Zeke has messed with that, so..."

Eren's eyes drop to the floor. "Jean can be affected too. Even if he's in a coma..." although still in a coma due to his injuries, no one knew if he would stay like that if Zeke opened his mouth to scream.

Eren shakes his head. He turns to Levi, even now he seems nonchalant and more in control. "Captain Levi... How did you... How did you know?"

"About Zeke or this plot or yours?" He challenges. "I've been following that bastard. And when some of Hange titan Syringes went missing I was guessing he would use the same old trick of poisoning people with his spinal fluid again."

Levi kneels down to be eye level with Eren. "And obviously. It worked."

Kenny chuckles. He throws the dagger into the air and catches it in a manner of showmanship. "Now, obviously, killing the queen will end up in more bad than good." he points out. "And what-- exactly-- were you planning to do after? With Zeke and Dina and all?"

"I had no other choice." Eren turns his head away. "I've seen the two of them-- Dina-- Dina worships her son. She will never believe me even if I tell her."

"Sure. That lady's messed up in the head." Kenny says, vaguely pointing at his own head. "So much I noticed since running after her. She's crazy. But she ain't blind."

"Listen Eren, what you do or don't do with the royal family is not my problem." Levi says as a matter of fact. "All I care about is carrying out Erwins order and killing Zeke. So listen closely, because this is your only chance."

Eren looks at Mikasa, a silent question in the air. She nods. "I'm listening..." he accepts wearily.

"Eren?"

His soft but completely aware voice makes Eren stop in his tracks. Armin is standing near Dina's throne room, a thick folder in his

hands. Eren runs to him with a smile. "Armin! You're awake."

Armin nods slowly. "Yeah... I'm awake..." he mumbles.

"Since when?"

"Since you used the rumbling."

Eren's smile slips from his face. "Armin, I--"

Armin shakes his head. "Just don't-- I don't need to think about it now. I'm just glad I'm awake and you're here." he sighs loudly. Eren bites his lips, he gently cups Armin's face and leans down, until their lips are an inch apart. Armin leans up, closing the distance and kissing the others lips. He pulls back quickly, keeping it gentle and small. "Eren-- not in the open like this!" he whispers, his cheeks growing red.

Eren chuckles. "Alright, Alright. I--"

Armin puts a finger on his lips. "No, let me." he says. "Tonight. On the beach. I have a surprise for you."

To say Eren is shocked is an underestimation. "Armin, don't push yourself like this I--"

A gentle smile settles on Armin's lips. "So you accept the date?"

The words die in Eren's throat. Zeke's memory stays like a bitter reminder. "I uh... I ok." he says. He feels horrible but instantly knows that Armin being so far away means he's going to be safe. "Sure! The usual beach?"

Armin smiles and nods. "See you tonight at 7!" he says and turns around. He waves as he runs away.

Eren's smile freezes on his lips. "See you at seven.."

"I'll need more time to kill her." Eren says as a matter of fact.

Zeke doesn't look up from his book. "I thought I was clear about the time limit." he looks at the door from the corner of his eyes. Zeke always makes sure he's alone in his royal room. Why? Eren doesn't even want to know.

Zeke closes his book. "I thought I was clear about the time limit, do you want me to..." he trails off.

"No." Eren says, adding extra fear to his voice for the sake of acting.

Zeke hums, he plays with his beard with a soft chuckle. "I haven't seen Armin in the palace grounds today. Have you relocated him?" Zeke asks. "Ah poor soul, does he know what danger he is in?"

"No?"

"Maybe I should call him? Do you think he'll hear me if I *scream* ?"

"NO!" Eren raises his hands. "Fine, Ok, I'll do it. I'll do it."

A small smile settles on Zeke's lips. "That's better. I want to hear the news of my mothers death before tonight, Eren. Or you can say goodbye to your mother, Armin and Historia."

Eren grinds his teeth. "You're a devil."

"Have been since I was nine." Zeke admits with a sigh. "If I were you, I'd use this little time My mother spends alone on the balcony. Not only she's alone, but also the guards can't see her so you'll leave no witnesses."

"Sometimes I wonder if you really are her son..."

"Blood relations mean nothing, not in the grand scheme of things." he shakes his head. "As I said, you're too brainwashed by them to understand. But please, Eren, I will guide you back one day and--"

"--save it." Eren holds up a hand. "Fine, you want me to kill her this afternoon? I will." he turns around and slams the doors behind him.

Zeke doesn't believe him.

According to his military reports, Eren has always been emotional and impulsive. But he would put his behavior above normal impulsiveness.

It was curiosity that pushed him to check up on his mother the time he knew she would be alone. The time she usually spent staring at the horizon with a fresh cup of tea in her hand. The time he told Eren to kill her.

He nods at the guards and opens the door herself, he quickly closes it behind him before either of the soldiers can have a chance to peek inside.

Such weak security, it's a shame --

His thoughts stop to a halt.

The blood drips from the dagger in thick droplets. Their silent sound takes Zeke's entire world. Eren cleans it with his sleeve. He turns around slowly, his entire front is painted in a single splash of crimson. "... Happy... now?" Eren pants. He throws his dagger and walks away, blood dripping down his chin.

Behind him, the fallen corpse of his mother and the shattered teacups are visible.

"I'm running away to the woods before Historia finds out. Meet me there tonight and Zeke--" his eyes burn with madness. "You *promised*."

Zeke doesn't spare him a look as he walks away.

Instead, he has eyes for the corpse on the ground. Eren's work was by no means clean, they had fought and Eren had won. A few clear slices through her chin and throat, and Dina had bled to death. Her body is on the ground, limbs shaking in an odd angle that the living can not do.

And her gray eyes are empty.

Zeke kneels down, he slowly closes his mothers open eyes. "We had fun, mother," he says. "But I'm afraid I have more important plans to attend to."

Where did Eren say he was waiting for him? Ah yes, the forest.

This sounds like a trap. But what else is Eren planning to do? He's already pushed himself into a corner with no way back.

His lips spread into a smile over his mothers lifeless corpse.

"You believe me now?" Eren asks, eyes narrowed.

Dina buries her face in her hand. Her breathing grows faster and faster, her hands cling to her hair.

Her crown falls to the ground with a loud bang.

Dina shakes her head. "No... No... This is impossible." she whispers, she bites on her knuckles until it starts to steam. "No it's... It's impossible. I don't... You used the founder's power to make me see this. There's--there's no other explanation."

Eren turns to Kenny. "That's exactly why I asked him to come too. He's fiercely loyal to you. This whole thing was his idea after all, and I can't temper with him. Ask your loyal Ackerman, Dina. Ask what he saw."

Dina slowly closes her eyes. "Kenny..." she whispers. "What did... What did you see?"

"Ah, clearly all the bad stuff." Kenny hits his fedora hat up. "Eren here brought a poor corpse up here, asked for your help to make it look like he's killed you. Used the power of the titans to make everyone hallucinate it's *your* corpse..."

Kenny looks down at the body and then back up at Dina.

"Although this ain't even a lil like you. Not to me, anyway." Kenny whispers. He turns back to the two of them. "He told Zeke he murdered you. Yo golden son looked surprised but said and I quote "We had fun, mother, but I'm afraid I have more important plans to attend to", long story short. Your son is fucked up in the head, your majesty."

Dina grinds her teeth. "And the whole..." she growls. "The whole thing about Armin, Historia and... Carla is that..."

"He's fed them his spinal fluid." Eren nods. "They're all in danger."

"Come on, your highness." Kenny chuckles. "I know you. You might be messed up but you're not blind."

Dina fists her hair, she says nothing.

She leans her elbows on her knees, a long moment of silence passed before she let her head rise up and meet their eyes. "Who else knows?"

"Me, Kenny, Levi and Mikasa." Eren lists them.

"All the Ackermans?" She mumbles. "... Makes sense. What else did he ask you to do?"

Eren bites his lips. "He wants to meet up in a forest. We all know what he wants to do then."

"Cut all our ball--"

"Kenny." Dina says, a tone of warning. Then she turns to Eren again, she can't keep eye contact and her gaze slips to the ground. "... You'll stop him right?"

"Of fucking course. Levi can't help us. But Mikasa and I can handle him." Eren narrows his eyes. "And I need you to make sure Historia, Armin and my mother are safe."

"Consider it done." she nods. "... And why is captain Levi unavailable?"

Eren shrugs. "Some super special mission from Hange. I don't know the details. We don't need him anyway, either."

Dina closes her eyes, resigned. "Fine well, whatever you think... Just one thing, Eren..." she meets his surprise, "*Don't spill his blood.*"

Eren blinks in surprise.

"Don't kill him." Dina repeats. "Whatever you do, Do not kill him."

Just as promised, Zeke waited for him in the forest he'd decided on.

Eren comes late, a few minutes late into the night. With his hands into his pockets and changed into cleaner clothes. His green eyes are screaming murder at him, Times like this Zeke misses his beast titan.

Well, time to get it back.

He offers a hand for Eren. Eren just walks closer until he's an arms length away, the hatred in his eyes doesn't go away.

"Let's do this, Eren." he offers, the tiniest smirk on his lips.

Eren hesitantly pulls his hand out, one physical contact is all Zeke needs. But even now Eren is hesitant, his hand slowly rises and Zeke can see a faint tickle of blood on his palm. "There is nowhere else you can go, Eren." Zeke shakes his head. "this is the ending of Eldia. Of pain, of suffering in this world. Peacefully and gradually. And I can finally make you see the reason."

Eren's hand freezes.

Then he pulls it back. "On second thought, I've changed my mind." he says as a matter of fact. "I always knew you belonged in an underground prison."

Eren bites on his hand. Yellow lightning zaps between the trees and the next moment, his titan emerges.

Zeke screams, Eren flinches for a moment inside his titan, calculating if his loved ones are truly far enough from this chaos to be safe.

Eren's titan doesn't look surprised about the trap Zeke has put for him. After all the trouble Zeke went through to make sure the people he had been kidnapping went unnoticed.

The titans attack Eren at the same time, the attack titan gets buried under a pile of steaming flesh.

Another titan comes close to zeke and offers its hand. Zeke climbs to the titans hands and doesn't spare a look. "You can't kill me, Eren, so don't try." he says as the titan raises his hand. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask in another way, once your loved ones come to me you'll certainly change your mind."

Another roar of the attack titan fills the area. He throws some of the titans away while clawing his way out. He watches Zeke leave from the corner of his eyes. "Oh no..." Eren smiles to himself. "I can't kill you, that honor belongs to someone else."

A loud zipping sound echoes around his ears, Mikasa lands on the titan directly above him and slices its nape. "It's done!" she yells. "He went after him-- now stop playing around and finish these titans off!"

Eren smiles from ear to ear.

Zeke Yeager sits on a titan's hand and it runs through the forest for him. He laughs quietly to himself, thinking how far must Eren's brainwashing go.

He looks back, just a spare thought and checks on how Eren is doing.

Instead, he hears a sudden zipping sound and something impacts against the titan carrying him. It makes an inhuman sound and falls to the ground. Zeke has just enough time to save himself from death by impact. He rolls on the hard ground of the forest, some of the branches bruise his body.

He turns around to see what happened but a razor sharp blade pierces his mouth.

"Don't even think about screaming." says a familiar voice. A man in a hoodie. He slowly takes it off to reveal his face. "Pathetic, isn't it?" Levi whispers, looking down on the beast titan.

pushing the blade deeper into the titan shifter's mouth, he barely bites back a bloodied cough. "You and I... Have some unfinished business." Levi says, "A long time ago, I was ordered to kill the beast titan. By someone very special. And yet-- you're still alive."

Levi pulls his blade out. Zeke grinds his teeth. "The 'ueen..." he whispers, his damaged mouth unable to speak clearly. "She 'as ordered not to-not to 'ill me, huh?"

"True..." Levi says as a matter of fact, he holds the blade high above Zeke's throat, the rising sun reflecting on the dense metal. "... But

you've killed the only person I've ever wanted to obey."

The sound of blades in the air is followed by a wet, dying sound.

Minutes pass. Mikasa and Eren reach the scene fully covered in steaming titan blood. All they see is an area of blood stained grass.

Mikasa puts her hands on her hips. "Well, this complicates things. He wasn't supposed to hide the body." she whispers and kicks a nearby rock.

Eren's eyes fall on the ground, on the blood stained grass and its gruesome smell.

Eren kneels down, putting his hand over the grass, saying nothing.

Mikasa puts a hand on his shoulder, squeezing reassuringly.

Two weeks later,

Southern port, Paradise:

Lost prince investigation still underway,

No new news from the lost "Prince" Zeke Yeager as of the publication of this newspaper. The military police refuse to comment.

Liberio to be freed,

Paradisian sources have been stationed in Liberio, the locals cold welcome was to be expected.

Wanted prince?

Reliable sources claim Zeke Yeager had fallen from Queen Dina's good graces due to undisclosed matters. Is that the reason for his disappearance? Why hasn't the queen made a public announcement?

Armin hums as he passes the news stand. The poor boy selling the newspapers in the port makes it all look much more interesting than it actually is. In the end, Armin decides to buy a newspaper simply to make the boy happy.

He opens it and starts to read.

Paradise in Liberio?

All you need to know about what has been made public about Queen Dina's plans for Liberio.

He covers his face with the newspaper while he pretends to read. Aside from his black and white pictures, not many people have seen and heard of Armin in person. Armin Arlert, aside from being the queen's trusted advisor and a former veteran scout, hasn't had much of a popular impact so that people would recognise him widely.

And for the first time, Armin is going to use that.

Albeit someone from the castle is going to recognise him at first glance, so he's not going to risk it.

His ship is announced and he sneaks in, he shows his forged travel permission under the same name he used last time he sneaked to Liberio.

Most people on this ship were either military officers or people going to Liberio under Queen Dina's direct order to maintain "peace".

It's a part of her reign now, she would act like it.

Armin notices Royal guards on the port and immediately hides. He can't risk any of them recognising him. His curiosity doesn't allow

him to get far though.

He can see Historia, Ymir and Eren come on board. Armin bites his lips and looks away. He'll leave them. He'll leave them like that and although it hurts him to leave Eren in so much confusion like this, he needs to go.

Away from Paradise.

Away from all his crushing responsibilities.

He's a dying man, let him die in peace. It's only a matter of time until Eren starts pressing for answers again. He knows Eren knows that he's made a deal with Ymir. He just doesn't know what it is and what's going to be the end of it.

And Armin doesn't want to explain.

They don't notice him however, and start talking between themselves until four little heads climb up on board. Gabi, snarls at Eren. Falco beams. "Mister Eren are you--"

Eren raises both of his hands in a surrender sign. "I'm just here to check up on you people and make sure the brat hasn't killed anyone else." Eren says as a matter of fact. "... And to make sure you four go back home."

"Fuck you!" Gabi yells from the back of the cell.

"Ah, such lovely language." He takes another step closer to the kids to ruffle Falco and Udo's hair. The other girl, Zoofia, tilted her head. Her face remained completely emotionless. "I still can't believe you're just letting us go like that?" she asks, almost curiously.

Historia puts a hand on Gabi's shoulder. Her shoulders relax and Historia just squeezes reassuringly. "I'm glad we can reach a peaceful settlement at least..." she says. Gabi nods silently. "I'm

sorry..." she says. "For trying to shoot you... But not for trying to shoot him."

"Wow, thank you so much." Then, Eren turns his attention back to Falco. Eren kneels down on one knee, and stares into his eyes. "Falco, if you ever needed anything..." he says as he holds up a card. "Just show this to the telephone guy and tell him to connect you directly to the palace, to Eren Yeager, I'll answer."

Falco nods, he takes the card and holds it close to his heart. "Will you... Will you send my brother home when he turns back into a human?"

Eren's eyes soften. "Legally they are prisoners of war... You understand why we can't let them leave when Marley is still around, right?"

Falco opens his mouth to protest but the words die in his mouth.

Eren doesn't stay around for much longer, which makes pretending to be a normal person so much easier. Easier to pretend he doesn't know any of them.

I need to leave . He tells himself. if I want Eren to stop using the rumbling like some last minute solution, then he needs to think I'll be crushed too.

It worked last time.

He wants to turn away but notices a pair of olive green eyes staring at him, wide and bewildered while still between Historia and Ymir.

Armin freezes.

Falco stares at the man.

Falco knows what he looks like. And he's short enough to see right under his hat.

He can hear his thoughts. He has to open his mouth and all Armin's plans will go down the drain.

That's Mr Oswin-- Armin Arlert! He's on board with what looks like the cheapest disguise he could find .

Armin smiles, and gently puts his finger over his mouth, signaling him to keep quiet.

Thankfully, Falco does.

Sooo how was it? Hopefully, they're gone. And so is Armin. Next chapter some insight on Armin and what he's up to.

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Mirror memories and Deja-vu

Chapter 29: Mirror memories and Deja-vu

Finally, we're here. I've wanted to make Armin leave for a huge while now xD

Dina, like most people in absolute power, was doomed to develop a dictator's disease (like most of my favorite historical figures did) and the trigger for it is Zeke death. If you're not familiar with it, I can summarize the dictator's disease (I hope that's the english name lol) like this: they go power crazy, develop severe anxiety, and lash out at people closest to them. They often end up killing their advisors/children/siblings/heirs and ruin their whole hard work.

Of course-- Armin is going to notice this and leave before he gets burnt.

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

war, death mentioned, suicide mentions (they assume Armin's goodbye letter is a suicide note and talk about it later on. That has consequences)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The news of Zeke's disappearance has shaken not only the court, but the whole country.

Its effect is more visible than most in the court meeting.

Dina is tense, her shoulders tense and her chin held higher than usual, looking down at every single person in front of her like an inferior, a suspect for her son's disappearance.

What surprised Armin, was her reluctance to listen to her advisors and representative's ideas. He dismissed them all, it extended to Armin as well, whom she looked at with narrowed eyes and a scowl.

Armin brushed it off as her grief. It was no secret that Zeke is most likely dead. He's made so many enemies by turning people into titans that his chances of survival are surprisingly low for a prince. So Armin didn't take it personally.

He returned to his room with a bitter taste in his mouth and decided to say what he wanted in the next court meeting.

Unreal.

That was the word.

His head is filled with cotton, not brain. Maybe it worked overtime to process the arrival of his memories. It gave him some time, some time to fly in between awareness and numbness. He knew, he knew it was only temporary, but when he looked at the calendar--

--Really looked at it, a curious sneak to understand what day it was and when was the next court meeting--

--and it hit him. He'd missed the new years while in Marley. It was no longer 852, it was the year 853.

That news threw a bucket of ice over Armin's body. The air became colder and crueler than what it actually was.

Armin should start counting the days.

He never stopped to think about what he'd do when the time finally comes. And the roller coaster of events never gave him the chance to make a bucket list. Now, that the tik tik sound of the clock in his head is too loud, his mind is blank when it comes to what he wants to do.

The day Zeke was last seen, Armin was at the beach, waiting for Eren to arrive.

He was supposed to come in the afternoon, now the sun was setting down and Armin was left alone behind a table full of Erens favorite food he asked Nicolo to make.

Armin waited....

And waited...

And waited...

When the moon rose and the water levels were much higher than when he arrived, his tired mind supplied Armin with the doubt that Maybe Eren had forgotten.

The food had gone cold.

And the candle was done burning up.

Armin sighed loudly, he leaned towards the candle and blew it out with one angry exhale.

It wasn't until he heard about Zeke, then he knew.

Eren started acting strange since Zeke's disappearance. Not strange enough that everyone could point their finger on it, no. It was subtle in ways only Armin could tell. The way he lingered a little longer with

their hugs, or asked to spend time doing absolute day to day acts with Armin, or how he whispered with Mikasa behind his back.

Armin never mentioned the date Eren forgot, he was too busy killing his brother after all.

And besides, Armin enjoyed it, he grew to enjoy the little things. Their little dates in the library, where Eren would listen endlessly as Armin read a random book out loud, or the times they took the day off to see the ocean, or the times Eren invited him to have dinner with his mother.

He had eight months left, every event from now could be his last.

However, as their relationship got smoother, Armin's life as Dina's advisor is harder than ever.

Times like this, Armin thinks Zeke's disappearance relieves Eren and Aggravates Dina like nothing else.

The court is simple in theory. Historia gave his job back to him almost just as Liberio was officially handed to Paradise. It called for new rules and regulations to be added and accepted by the queen and its court of advisors.

Although... Since the beginning, Dina has refused to listen to any of them. Other than the ones who actually agree with her.

It was supposed to be about how to deal with rebellion in Liberio. It got polarized quickly, some believed they should be treated like paradisiacs, some offered even death for rebellion against the rule of Paradise.

It didn't even take ten seconds for Dina to decide her verdict.

"Surely you don't mean that." Armin mumbles, in disbelief. "This isn't about possible civil war, how can they possibly rise against you when they have nothing."

Dina looks at him from the corner of her eyes. "We did. It is possible." she says as a matter of fact. "Besides, Marley can arm them."

"Marley is fighting its own battles. If you treat them like this, you'll just give them a reason to rebel against you." Armin said back.

"We can't risk a rebellion. We can't disagree in such a state."

"We can't risk discriminating them--"

"I AM THE QUEEN." Dina yells. "I am the one who makes the final decision! I am the one whose word is law!"

Armin freezes.

He stares at Dina, wide eyed and his jaw dropped. He quickly gathered himself. "I think... It's better to call for a breather."

Dina leans back against her throne. "I don't see a reason for it. I've made my final decision."

"Maybe you should--"

"The Queen has made the best decision!"

Armin stops in his tracks. He slowly turns around, wondering who in their right mind would suggest public execution would sit well with people who already hold them as devils. Armin doesn't know him, it's a man dressed in noble clothing that looks like He's moments away from his grave. He pushes his glasses up and smiles. "Who would not? Those rats need to be taught a lesson."

because of course, there is always a flatterer.

Another man stands up, a young man dressed in a manner just as noble as the older man. The card in front of him says he's from Trost. "This is absurd! If the queen accepts this proposal that means leaving space for *legally* killing anyone who might barely disagree

with the throne!" the young man looks at the queen. "Isn't that against everything this court is supposed to stand for? So that the queen can hear ideas even against her own."

The military is silent. Rico Brzenska narrows her eyes slightly, the MP doesn't react and Hange spins their pen.

"My opinion is final." she says as a matter of fact. She refuses to listen to anything else Armin has to say, and sings the papers away without a moment of hesitation.

What Armin had feared came sooner than he thought.

Marley's activities in the south had increased. Meaning they were closer to Liberio, therefore closer to Paradises borders. As he feared, Eren offered another partial rumbling to deal with it.

The moment Armin hears about the details of it, he plans to stop it. He has to stop it. This is an absolute madness he can stop with some words.

But before he could leave his room. The royal messenger from the queen arrived in his room. The old man offers him a box, Armin arches an eyebrow at it but accepts it anyway. Curiosity gets the better of him and he opens it quickly.

There's two papers, one with Dina's handwriting and the other neatly folded inside.

Don't mess with my plans.

Armin doesn't understand, until he opens the other letter, and the box falls into the ground.

We regret to inform you of the passing of Richard Trueman, a young aspiring man the world took from us too soon.

He was best known for his work in the royal court as the representative of Trost--

Representative of Trost.

The paper folds in Armin's strong and angry grip.

Later, a quick inspection proved that the poor representative's throat had been slit.

A plan quickly appears in Armin's mind.

After all, didn't it work the first time he tried it?

This section of the palace was made with a huge royal family in mind.

It had wide hallways and large doors to superb rooms. The end of it reached the monarch's quarters, of course. Historia and Erens room just next to it. With the newest one being Carla's.

Armin takes a deep breath as he walks past Historias room. He can hear her loud laughter inside, and then Ymir's chuckle. It sounds nice, knowing his effort has had some positive impact at least.

Ymir is alive.

Armin stops in front of Historias door, the corners of his mouth quirks upwards. Well, Historia did get a lot from his meddling with the timeline. He shakes his head and keeps moving. If he didn't know any better, he would call himself *jealous* .

He passes Carlas and walks over to Erens.

There is a lot he can say, starting with why he plans to make the queen angry tomorrow and escape to Marley, like *why* he wants

Eren to think he'll be in Marley.

When in fact, he himself doesn't know where he's going.

He has about eight months left, the third day of fall is right around the corner and his time will be up before he knows it. The powers of the titans will vanish too, and so will the curse of Ymir, hopefully.

He stares at the door, he wants to knock at the door with the back of his hand but his hand freezes over Eren's door.

what should I even say?

hey, I wanna gaslight you into never using the rumbling again?

hey, I have eight months left to live?

hey, I wanna disappear from your life!?

"This is a mistake." he mumbles to himself and pushes his hands back into his pockets. He'll disappear tomorrow, plain and simple.

But...

That's too cruel.

A dark part of his brain supplies the answer. *and so is using the rumbling without control.*

Armin doesn't have the time to wonder, because just at that moment, Carla's door opens and Eren walks out. He'll still be talking to his mother, waving and saying goodbye with a happy smirk on his lips. He closes the door and looks up to his own room.

Their eyes meet.

Armin's breath catches in his throat but Eren's smile grows, from ear to ear. "Armin!" he whispers. "I wanted to come get you- I talked to

Nicolo about a reservation. You know-- to make up about that date I forgot."

Armin arches an eyebrow. "You remember that you forgot?" That's a new one.

Eren rubs the back of his neck, almost awkwardly. "Sorry, I was... I'm a little busy. But believe me I--"

Armin holds up a hand. "No, I understand. It's probably about... Zeke... Right?"

"I'll explain everything to you during dinner, Ok?" Eren urged. "Come on-- let's go. I have a surprise for you in the restaurant."

"Eren... I would love that but..." he sighs. "I have things to do in the morning. I don't really feel like leaving the castle tonight."

"Armin?" he whispers.

Armin swallows hard. "I uh, I just wanted to check up on you." he shakes his head. "Then I'll be back. Just--Just wanted to make sure you're ok."

"Why?"

"Nightmare." Armin says immediately. The first lie he can think of.

Eren smiles softly and opens the door of his room. "You wanna sleep here tonight?" he offers. "We can cuddle"

"Like kids?" he laughs. "Sure!" he says before his rational mind can stop him. Who would refuse an offer like that?

Armin asks for a visit with the queen the next day, which is granted to him without a second thought, given that he is the royal advisor.

Armin goes inside the throne with a full folder and ready to set aflame to not only the queen's patience, but the entire justice system Dina is so eager to change.

Just as he expected, she is sitting on her throne with her perfectly polished and shining crown on her head. He rests her head against her hand and arches an eyebrow. "Are you here for another argument?" she asks.

"Not really. I have two facts to say. None of them can be changed." he says, he gives the folder to the queen and steps back.

Dina takes it and opens it, she presses her mouth to a thin angry line the moment she reads the first page. "A court martial?" Dina whispers. "Held a week ago and... And you voted in for... Reiner Brauns innocence?" her eyes widened. "Armin, *What in the world is wrong with you?* "

Armin shrugs. It's already done. He's already manipulated the judge and the system he himself helped make into overlooking Reiner's crimes, the look of absolute madness in Dina's eyes is worth every single struggle he put on it. "He helped me back to Marley. I thought it's little to return the favor. Besides, the armored titan broke the walls both times. Not Reiner. And thanks to us, he's not the Armored titan anymore."

The paper folds under Dina's angry grip. "Armin, you made him escape justice." she growls. "He killed thousands! In cold blood and he has absolutely no regret--"

"So will we, if we continue with using the rumbling like some trump card." Armin shots back. "As I said, the least I can do."

"Don't make me start thinking about your replacement, Armin." Dina whispers, a threat in her tone.

Armin narrows his eyes, he fights the smirk on his lips.

Dina leans back on her throne, she puts the papers aside, under her tightly closed fist. "Armin, take a few weeks off." Dina offers. "Dealing with the aftermaths of Marleyan torture is not easy, you need to take it easy, let your body head and deal with your emotions."

Oh. So she's talking from experience.

"There is a lot you can still do. You're young, Armin, and Paradise still wants that sharp mind of yours in its ranks. Don't ruin your own reputation like this."

Armin tilts his head.

"I'm afraid Paradise will face greater threats and I'm too much of an old soul to deal with any of it." he says.

"Like what?"

"I'll humor you, My Queen." he adds sarcastically. "On the third day of fall, this year, the power of the titans will vanish from the face of the earth." he says, he plays with his fingers like something has exploded in his hands.

Dina shakes her head. "You've lost your mind."

"Take me for a fool but how many of my bizarre predictions have actually happened?" Armin challenges.

Dina rubs her chin. "How are you so sure?" Dina asks, insisting again on an answer she will never get.

Armin's eyes soften. "I am. You have no choice but to believe me. You have about nine more months. The power of the titans will end on the third day of fall 854. That includes the titan shifters, pure titans, the walls, everything. The living titans will turn back into normal humans and any nonliving thing related to titans will vaporize." he warns again. "Do what needs to be done to ensure Paradise's safety... My job is done here."

Armin takes another step back. "I'm here to resign." Armin clears his throat. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity to change the world, my queen." Armin salutes and walks away, leaving Dina alone in a stunned silence.

She watches him leave, but eventually she makes a dismissive wave, like she's the one allowing him to leave the throne room.

Armin stops by the doors, his hand grip the handle and then he shuts his eyes. "And for the record..." Armin puts his free hand under his neck, feeling the outline of Annie's ring under his fingertips, the same ring he has tried to keep around his neck since the moment she died. He looks around, and glares daggers at the new female titan.

"You were not worth the sacrifice that brought you here."

Armin slams the door behind him and leaves.

He leaves the island on the same day.

Eren says goodbye to the warrior candidates, and surprisingly, it doesn't blow up in his face. He just has to trust Historia regarding the children. She's the best when it comes to that. After all, she runs an orphanage.

At first, he tries to find Armin to see what he's up to today, but he doesn't find him. He asks Historia, she hasn't seen him either. Then he asks Mikasa, and she has seen him, and she's looking for him too. "Armin was acting very affectionate this morning." Mikasa mumbles, her hands search through her pocket. "He even gave me this. I didn't even know he kept it." She opens her palm and there is a folded piece of paper inside of it. She opens it and Eren recognises it. It's the list of the top ten that was given the day of their graduation, the one Mikasa had scored first.

Congrats! It's something to remember!

It was Armin's handwriting in cursive that caught Eren's attention.

That strengthens Eren's resolve to look harder. Before he can send a search party, however, a guard finds him. "Sir, it's a letter from Armin Arlert," the guard says.

"A letter!?" Eren gasps. He snatches the paper from the guard and opens it immediately.

To whom I shared my dreams with,

Eren's heart aches, that can't be good.

Dear Eren,

I owe you an apology as big as the world we wanted to explore. And I'm afraid I can't bring myself to say it face to face.

By the time you receive this letter you will have noticed my absence. I will not disclose any information about where I am or what I am planning to do, because I don't intend on being found or returning to paradise ever again.

I owe you an apology as big as the dream we had, but I don't have the words to express it. And no reason that's satisfactory. I hope you can forgive me one day, and that that day isn't too far into the future.

The situation in Paradise has become far more complicated than I would've liked. Too complicated and too different for me to comprehend it. Maybe that's why I fail to understand the reason why the rumbling seems to happen with every single inconvenience. Of course, I can not let this happen.

So I will be traveling Marley as much as I'm able to. Technically, I won't be able to go far but that would be enough to stop you from abusing the rumbling. Don't worry, I don't intend to get myself arrested again.

And I don't intend to return, so don't look for me. This is not a future you can fight.

I love you, and I'm sorry.

-Armin Arlert.

Eren has never run this fast in his life.

If he gets to Dina fast enough, he might be able to use the power of the titans to track Armin down fast enough. After all, he did drink some of Zeke's spinal fluid to make it much easier to track him down.

He runs inside the castle and barges the door to Dina's room open. She's sitting behind her table with her reading glasses on. She blinks up in surprise and barely holds up a hand to stop the guards from running in after Eren.

"Eren! You can't barge in--"

"Later, I'll explain everything--" he grabs Dina's hand, golden lightning dances between their skin. "--**later.**"

The world crumbles and reforms around them in an instant. However, Eren doesn't stop to explain. He turns to the glowing tree in the paths. "Ymir!" he yells. "Find Armin, now!"

Dina narrows her eyes. She rubs the wrist Eren had caught. "We don't need her for that. We'll just track Zeke's spinal fluid." She rolls her eyes. "I can already feel Carla in the kitchens, and Historia in her room. Armin is..." her frown slowly disappeared. "I can't feel Armin."

"Then try harder!" Eren shouts angrily. "He wrote a goodbye letter and disappeared."

"I can't." Dina says. "There's a possibility he was never infected at all and... Zeke was bluffing."

Eren grinds his teeth. "No that's-- unless--" Eren turns back to the glowing tree. "Or maybe this has something to do with the deal Armin has made with Ymir."

Eren ignores Dina and walks towards the glowing tree. "YMIR!" he yells. "SHOW YOURSELF YOU COWARD."

He can see the silhouette of a body in the glowing tree of the paths. He doesn't wait, and runs towards it. He runs and runs and runs until he can see Ymir's small body. A ten year old girl.

"Eren STOP!" Dina orders but she's too far. Too far for Eren to care about her opinions any more.

Eren reaches for the girl's shoulder, he wants to hold her and order her to confess. Confess to whatever Armin has given for whatever price he had done it. He needed to know. He needed to--

Time slows down.

The moment Eren's hand touches Ymir's shoulder, a wave breaks out. It phases through Eren's body but hits Dina and makes her a pile of sand. Then, Ymir's body explodes in a fit of golden light. That throws Eren back, he lands on the sands.

"About damn time you did that..."

The voice echoes loudly in his ears. He massages his eyes and tries to turn the blinding golden light away. He slowly opens his eyes and focuses his vision on the person standing in front of him. It's not a young girl, no. *He* is around his age. With long long hair and a face that's hidden behind the shadows.

He's still in the paths, the same glowing tree, but it feels like the truth was finally laid bare for Eren to see.

"Who are you!?" Eren shouts, and demands the person.

The man shakes his head, he pushes his hands into his pockets and steps into the light, Eren sees his own face staring at him, and clicking his tongue. Eren of the paths smiles as looks down at him. "I believe you've seen yourself in the mirror enough to recognise me."

"Is this a game!?"

"It's not..."

"This is so fucked up." Eren growls. "This can't be... whatever, I don't even care! I'm done playing games." He stands up, and holds a threatening finger towards the Eren of the paths. "Just tell me where Armin is! I can't track him!"

"You can't do that easily." the other shakes his head. "Listen, I can finally tell you the truth while Ymir isn't around. Do you want to know what deal Armin has made or do you not?!?"

Eren's eyes widened. "Yes!" he demands. "Tell me every damn detail now." Eren fists a handful of white sand between his fingers. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? Why didn't--"

"I couldn't tell you. Neither could Armin. Ymir wouldn't let him." Eren explains. "I tried once. Kept sending you some future memories but Ymir always stopped me."

"Ymir!?"

Eren of the paths nods slowly. "Remember how Armin fell asleep in most inconvenient places? Well, Ymir made him fall asleep when she didn't want some things to change. She's been traveling with Armin since he made a deal." Eren of the paths narrows his eyes almost dangerously. "And the reason I can talk to you without interruption now, is that she is with Armin, far away from where we are now."

Eren presses his mouth to a thin line. "Then be done with it. Tell me what all this is about."

He chuckles. "I can't say it..." the other man holds his hand up and reaches for Eren's forehead. "But I can show you..." then he smiles. "A little warning-- it's filthy."

Eren doesn't flinch away, he stares down at the other Eren's eyes.

His fingers touch his forehead and memories he never knew he had flood Eren's mind.

Days later,

He officially reopened the bookshop three days ago. Nothing big, he just hung a small "open" sign on the bookshop after finishing the renovations.

He made a room for himself in the attic, where he slept and rested. He had a few curious visitors a day at best, so he knew he could use most of his free time to finish what his grandfather couldn't.

At the opening, a young Paradisian teacher came looking for him. She was maybe in her late twenties and far too eager to start her job for someone 20 kilometers away from the nearest war zone. She even offered to introduce him to her new students.

Armin wanted to remind her she herself needed introduction, but he stayed quiet.

But today is different, Armin is halfway done with reading his grandfather's ancient book. He needs some help with a lot of the vocabulary, but he has a general idea about the stories. It's a journal of one of the Eldian generals about 12 centuries ago. It's been rewritten three times and Armin is working on the *fourth* one, just to make modern people understand the text.

The door opens, the creaking sound of it echoes around the shop and Armin lifts his head to welcome the visitor. He recognises him

immediately. "Ah, Falco." Armin smiles. "I was expecting you!"

Falco closes the door behind him and leans against the door. He looks at him for a few seconds, silently.

Armin keeps smiling. He takes a small sip from his coffee, the taste makes him flinch. "You Marleyans certainly use magic with your coffees." he laughs and raises the cup into the air. "This tastes as strange as it's delicious.."

He puts the coffee away and points at the chair in front of him. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions," he says. "Please sit down. Feel free to ask them all."

Falco sits on the chair and crosses his arms over his chest. "What are you doing here, Mr Arlert?" he asks.

Armin hums, he doesn't answer Falcos question directly, instead he asks: "what would you do if you had about eight months left to live?"

It's a question Falco has asked himself a lot. Although it was always *thirteen years* and not the little time of *eight months* .

But then again, facing death everyday as a warrior might make you ask questions such as this most of the time.

"You don't need to answer." Armin says and slowly shuts his book and holds it up for Falco to see.

It had a hard brown cover with golden writings and margins. It's an old one, the pages yellowed and hanging by a thread. But Armin recognised the name of the book, a book by a famous ancient Eldian writer.

Falcos eyes widened. "Have you read it... Have you read this book?" Falco asks, his eyes almost shining.

Armin chuckles humorlessly. "I'm trying... My grandfather is-- was a massive fan. Our old house was littered with the author's books.

Though I think an Eldians book would be... Changed... For Propagandas sake here, wouldn't it?"

The question strikes Falco.

Armin clears his throat.

"I'm trying to rewrite it in modern linguistics. I myself have trouble understanding this version that is from four hundred years ago. Apparently, this commander had a rough childhood being only half Eldian. But he ended up marrying the princess. Anyway, tell me what happened in the Marleyan version of the book?"

Falco opens his mouth to say something, instead, he bites his tongue. It's a trick question, Armin already knows the answer.

Armin offers him the book, and gently holds him up for Falco to take it. "To answer your question, Falco, I'm here to fix some things."

Falcos hand reaches out until he's touching the surface of the book, then he slowly takes it from Armin's hands and hugs it. "You spoiled the ending for me, then." Falco says, a little bitterly. "Is your grandpa... The same one that died and left you his bookshop. I mean that was obviously a lie but it had some truth to it, right?"

Armin smiles a little, amused. "Not all I told you about my grandpa was a lie. He did have a bookshop he adored. He kept illegal books and once they weren't illegal anymore, he published and sold them so many times I can't even count." he chuckles. "He loved these books so much... So much so that he prioritized keeping them safe over going to a shelter when Marley attacked."

Falcos presses his mouth to a thin line.

"I was lying to you. First time I came to Liberio he was happy and Healthy and I-- He's dead now." Armin says and leans back. "And I think... I think he would have approved of me bringing all this here to Liberio."

"... all this?" Falco repeats. "... There's more?"

Armin nods slowly. "Of course," he mumbles. "I couldn't leave behind what my grandpa treasured so much, and I'm looking for a good place to leave them. So..." Armin points at the attic with his thumb. "Wanna see the rest of them?"

Falco's eyes glint but he doesn't say anything.

"This is the only good tailor in town, According to Colt."

Falco points at an old building and then the next.

"This is supposed to be our middle school building. This used to be a warrior training center. The classes will start next week."

Armin pushes his hands into his pockets, seriously, Dina is going a little fast. They walk a little down the busy street until they reach a shop. "This is where my mother usually buys our bread." Falco shows him.

"Oh, I'll need some." Armin mumbles. He opens the door and Falco jumps in first. He waves at the woman behind the clerk. "Hi Miss Lily!"

The woman smiles and waves back. "Hi Falco." she says softly. Then her eyes shift upwards. "Who is this young man?"

Armin nods slowly. "I'm Oswin, Ma'am." he says.

"Ah! The bookshop owner! There were some nasty rumors about you. Where were you?" she asks.

Armin chuckles. "It's a long story... I was a political prisoner. Let's say." he explains. "Falco says you have the best breads around."

That strikes something in the woman's eyes. "Ah... I'm afraid the baker had to go to war... I can copy him to the best of my abilities."

Armin arches an eyebrow, he looks down at Falco for explanation. He slowly shakes his head.

The woman moves to the back and comes back with two baguettes. "Yup, drafted to war and still hasn't returned. I don't think he ever will, now that Liberio isn't Marley anymore. I doubt he can ever come back."

"That's unfortunate." he mumbles.

That moment, the door opens again and an older man walks in. "Ah! Mister Leanhardt, what can I do for you?" the woman asks.

Armin freezes.

He slowly turns around and stares at the man.

Annie's father.

The cold realization grips his heart.

"Hello." the old man says curtly, he walks in with his cane. "A bougette and one sugary donut, please."

The woman makes a sad face and prepares his bag. Armin stares at the man until it's rude and he's glaring back at him. The old man hits his cane to the ground and the voice snaps Armin out of his thoughts. "Do you know no manners!?" he growls.

Armin opens his mouth to say something, but words fail him and he's speechless. Mr Leanhardt grabs his bag and marches out of the shop, not one more word is exchanged.

"Don't take it personally, young man." The woman says. "He hasn't been the same since the death of his daughter was confirmed by the Paradisian forces."

Armin looks away. "Oh..."

The woman points at the door with her thumb. "The donut he bought? That was Annie's favorite since she could walk. He has been buying one since Annie left for the second time. He kept saying if Annie comes back, he wants to have a fresh one ready at home."

Armin didn't need to add that to the pile on his conscience.

He quickly turns to Falco. "Do you know where he lives?"

The boy shrugs, Armin doesn't know what he expected when he asked that. He turns to the woman and she waves dismissively. "Of course I know. Do you have a pen or paper?"

Armin did.

She wrote the address and told her what buildings to turn at and what to ignore until he reaches the Leanheardts house. Armin listens very carefully.

He says goodbye to Falco and decides to follow the address written on the paper. As he walks on the filthy streets of Liberio, Armin thinks what words can possibly help his case with Mr Leanheardt. What does he want to achieve anyway? The man probably knows about his daughter's death by now.

And he did let Annie go once, right? That means Armin has done all that he can.

Right?

Armin stands in front of the door, the door he hopes is the right one for Annie's house. His eyes stare at the dark wood without really seeing. Is this the place Annie grew up in? Trained at? The place she returned to and then had to abandon?

(What happened in those few days she returned, did she have enough time with her father?)

The door bursts open,

Armin takes a step back, a little shocked that the man opened the door like that.

"Who are you!?" the man demands. "A refuge? I haven't seen you around. Or are you one of those Paradisians?"

Armin holds his hands up, just to show he's not a threat. "I'm not a refugee, no." Armin shakes his head. "I'm a paradisian. I was in their military and later royal castle and I was... And I was... And I was a close acquaintance of your daughters."

Because what could you name their relationship?

Mr Leanhardt doesn't react for a moment, then he fists his hands, his teeth grind. "Where is she then?" he growls. "What did you do to..." his tongue fails to form the words.

"Talk." he spits. "Where is my daughter?"

Armin looks down at his own palms. How should he break the news? "I'm sure you were told how she died."

Mr Leanhardt shook his head. "If you don't want to tell the truth then get lost!" he closes the door but Armin stops it from being completely closed by his foot. He hisses quietly but doesn't flinch. "I need to talk to you about her!"

Mr Leanhardt opens the door again. "You want me to break your foot!?"

"No! Just-- Just listen!" Armin shakes his head. "I'm Armin-- Armin Arlert and if the only one that can tell you what happened to her. But I can't do it in the open like this."

Mr Leanhardt considers it for a moment. "Arlert... Huh?" he steps away from the door. Armin takes the chance to go inside. The door slams behind him. "Talk."

"She was taken captive after she returned to Paradise." Armin explains, the sheer force of the old man's glare makes him inch up to the door. "At the time, the titan inheritance was just a theory so to prove it and to neutralize the threat of the female titan, A few survivors of her first attack decided to feed her to a pure titan."

The old man's hand starts to shake on his cane.

"Obviously it worked." Armin mumbles. His hand touches his neck unconsciously, feeling the outline of the metal around his neck.

He doesn't see the corridors Eren pulls him through. All he notices is the metal door of the dungeons as it opens. The sound pulls at his ears. Eren leads him through the first door and into a place that looks very suspiciously like a stinking morgue.

The soldiers lit two extra torches and left them alone with a white piece of parchment over a bloodied pile of crystals and body parts.

Armin opens his mouth to say something but nothing but a short gasp leaves his lips.

His purple eyes stare at the bloodied crystals that once formed a protective shell around Annie.

His feet buckle, no longer able to keep him upright and he falls to his knees. He buries his face in his hands and screams but no voice comes out of his throat.

He was wrong.

So, stupidly wrong.

Annie was--

Annie was--

It's not yours.

it belongs to her father.

He shakes his head. "And that's why... Annie doesn't have a memorial but--" he sighs. It takes a long moment of pause but Armin finally removes it from around his neck. He holds up Annie's ring in front of her father.

"I've been keeping this close, but it belongs to you."

Armin can't wait, his feet itching to leave, so he slowly takes the father's hand and puts the ring on it. He closes his fingers over it. "I'm sorry..." he says, fighting back tears. "I'm sorry I couldn't save Annie."

The empty place of the ring around his neck immediately starts to sting, to burn, but Armin gives Mr. Leander a curt smile. "I don't know if it was the right thing to do to come here, but you deserved to know."

He nods, which looks more like a bow of his head. He turns around to leave and makes sure to close the door as slowly and quietly as possible.

He walks down the street, with his hands pushed deeply into his pockets and the rhythm of his footsteps his only company.

He stops when he notices the fall of a fragile snowflake in front of him, a hand raised to the air to catch the tiny graceful thing.

"Uhm... Mr. Oswin... Are you ok?"

Falco waves his hand in front of his face to catch his attention. "I'm surprised you're alive, they're not known for being sociable."

Armin looks back up at the streets and starts walking. Falco stumbles after him.

Armin wipes the few tears that dares to escape and smiles at him. "I'm ok, Falco..." he says as he keeps walking. For once, his smile feels genuine. "I just feel... Liberated."

"Alert, huh?"

The old man watches Falco lead the way for the strange outsider.

Mr Leanhardt holds his daughter's ring close to his heart.

"So he is the one who sneaked you out of Paradise that day, huh, Annie?" he wonders outloud.

The silence is his dusted house doesn't answer back.

Mr Hoover, apparently, had been very sickly since Berthold was born.

Which doesn't surprise Armin at all, he had carried Bertholds memories for so long in the other timeline. He knew a lot about it. The latest research shows the changes in timeline hasn't done him many favors, no butterfly effect has made him miraculously healthy.

What he didn't know is that this shift in timing means Bertholds father is still alive. *that* did surprise him.

Since the hospital is mostly guarded by Paradisian soldiers, he asks Falco to ask around for him. The preteen does and meets him that afternoon to report back over a cup of tea.

"He's *stable* . But it's not reassuring." Falco nods. "Dr Yeager said the medicine from the Marleyan side of Liberio will help him for the time being. He's better now, compared to two months ago, healthcare was... Well... A luxury only the warrior unit could afford. But even then..."

Armin stares at his own cup of tea, the bitter bile in his mouth can't be sweetened by anything.

So Mr Hoover is in good hands, better hands than before. It's very little but he can't do much else.

He can't go up to the man and say: "I'm your son's murderer."

He'd rather stay away. "Thanks..." he whispers.

But there is one more member of the warriors he can help. "By the way..." he mumbles. "Where is Reiner?"

Falco stops sipping his tea, he chokes on it and spends a full minute coughing it out. "Mr Bruan-- uhm... Mr Bruan is oh--"

"Where is Reiner?" Armin asks again. "I thought I could see him around..."

Falco stiffens.

And then it hits him. "Falco, tell me the truth, is he hiding?" he asks.

Falco doesn't answer, he keeps his mouth strictly shut.

Armin stands up with a huff. He tells the boy to stay where he is, he leaves for his room and comes back with a copy of Reiner's pardon. He puts it in front of Falco. "Here, if you don't believe me." he says.

Falco reads over the file a few times, he holds it towards the light and watches the royal paradisian symbol and puts it down again. "It can be a fraud." he decides in the end, that annoys Armin like it never has. "Why would you do that?" Falco asks curiously.

Armin clears his throat. "Remember the torture chambers?"

Falco nods.

"Well he helped me. He knocked me out cold and saved me days of torture. It was the only way I could repay him."

Or at least, that's what little he remembers from the bits and pieces Eren of the paths let him keep from those days of torture.

"Falco, if you don't believe me, tell Gabi to come here," he says. "I bet she'll be willing to risk it." he hums, then he gives the paper to Falco entirely. "In fact, go give it to her yourself."

Falco hums. "I'm not really... Alright. I'll show you the way but I don't guarantee anything!" he says, raising his hands in surrender. "The Bruan family has always been secretive."

Armin stands up, he hits his fingers against the table. "Alright, lead the way."

Falco shows the way reluctantly. He walks slowly, he runs a few circles that Armin doesn't comment on, but eventually, they reach a two story house that looks bigger than the average houses he's seen. So the entire family is here.

"Oh, and if Gabi asked, I didn't bring you here!" Falco says, he knocks on their door and runs to hide without further words.

Armin takes a deep breath, he makes sure the papers are in his bag as he waits for someone to open the door.

The person who opens the door is an old woman, Armin remembers her clearly from the rumbling. *Reiner's mother*.

And behind her, her entire family glares down at Armin, oh, so they've realized he's not from around here.

Gabi pushes forward until she can see him. "Hold on, I know you!" Gabi says, pointing a finger at Armin. "You're--"

"Armin Arlert might have heard of me." he says, looking at the woman he assumes is Reiner's mother. "Can this family keep a

secret?"

"Reiner is not here." she says automatically. "He isn't--"

Armin raises his hands in surrender. "I have good news, believe me."

Somehow Gabi is the least hostile in that house, so he kneels down and gives him the papers officiating Reiner's pardon. "Give this to Reiner for me, please. And send my thanks." he asks.

Gabi pauses for a moment, but she accepts Armin after a few short seconds.

Armin leaves that house shortly after, not wanting to bother that family any longer.

Not even 24 hours later, Reiner appears in his bookshop.

Not anything to hide himself in, No, he shows up with normal civilian clothes.

"The guards didn't arrest me." he says as a matter of fact.

Armin puts the books he's working on away. "Congratulations, then," he says. "It worked!"

The next moment, Armin is being tackled in a bone crushing hug, one that he finds himself returning.

Armin folds that day's newspaper.

The string of curses that left his mouth is too vocal for the act he's putting up here. He climbs down the ladder. All color leaves his face when he sees four preteens at the counter.

Falco stares at him wide eyed, Gabi arches an eyebrow and Udo covers Zoofia's ears. Gabi barks out a laugh. "Not so polite and

respectable here, are you?" she asks.

Armin narrows his eyes, he shakes his hand dismissively. "I was in the military, what did you expect?" he looks at Udo and Zoofia and fights the urge to curse again. "I thought you were supposed to keep my existence here a secret."

Gabi ignores the last sentence. "So were we and we never heard someone say stuff like that to another person's mother..." Gabi clicks her tongue a few times.

Armin sighs loudly, he buries his head in his hands in shame. "What brings you here?" he mumbles, looking at the children from between his fingers.

Gabi opens her mouth but Udo beats her to it. "We wanted you to talk to the principles!" Udo says, stepping forward. "Our families just got the order, school is now mandatory until the end of middle school for all people of Liberio."

Armin hums. "Well, you have me to blame for that." he admits a little guilt. "I was the one who made it mandatory in Paradise... So..." he trails off.

Zoofia shakes her head. "No, that's not the point." she says. "According to our age, they've put us in the first grade of middle school."

Armin arches an eyebrow. "You're twelve right?" he asks. "That *is* your grade. Sorry but you'll have to finish the three years of middle--"

"No it's not!" Gabi snaps. "We didn't go through all that trouble in the warrior unit to listen to *children's* lessons!"

"If you keep throwing temper tantrums like one--"

"I might! If I have to listen to that old lady explain simple math to me one more time."

Udo nods. "It's getting ridiculous, the teachers are Paradisians and expect a paradisiens level, but the average Marleyan sixth grader is apparently lower and they insist on simple stuff."

"It's making the class boring." Zoofia ads.

Armin understands. He does. They did have the same problem back in Paradise three years ago as well. The difference between the people who already had access to education and those who weren't was too much for normal teachers to handle, Hence the existence of royal schools and advanced schools to help those above the curve. It comes to no one's surprise that the same couldn't be done here in Liberio.

Armin takes a deep breath, he pushes the news he just read in the newspaper aside to focus on the preteens here. "What can I do for you?" he asks.

Udo grins. "Maybe if you ask them, they'll move us up a few grades!"

"Or even give us our degree and let us back in the military!" Gabi finishes for him. "Like-- Liberio is supposed to be independent, right?"

Armin narrows his eyes, he wants to laugh at the irony. "Alright. It's nice that you think so highly of me but I can't do that..."

"Why!?"

"I quit my job, so I don't have any authoritative powers anymore. Even if I did it wasn't in my power." he clears his throat. "And if you haven't noticed... I'm in hiding here."

Gabi pouts. "Coward."

Armin ignores her. "You know that, Falco. Is that why you're quiet?"

Falco opens his mouth to say something but then he slowly nods.

"But you're still the librarian of this place. Just tell them we've been regular customers or something." Udo offers again. "Then they'll listen..."

Armin is done. He turns around and occupies his hands with the meaningless task of putting the books back on the shelves. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid you guys have to suffer through middle school."

He stops, his hand rests on a shelf. "It's not that bad..." he whispers. "You shouldn't be worried too much. Consider this a few free A+ grades."

But of course, the four keep insisting and asking for his help. Armin doesn't yield, he can't risk showing himself like this. He waits until the children are gone before he opens that day's newspaper again and stares at the second page.

Rumors spread around the castle about the pregnancy of the crown princess, Historia Reiss.

Armin balls the paper and throws it away. It seems no matter how much He wants the timelines to be different, Historia has to get pregnant. Again, something repeating.

The world wants to spit in his face.

When Reiner's mother visits and calls him "Armin" Armin knows his time on Liberio is up.

At first it was just Falco. Then Annie's dad, The Reiner, then Gabi, then Udo and Zoofia and now Reiner's mother?

Armin can only curse his own recklessness. It's only a matter of time before his secret spreads like wildfire and eventually a paradisian is going to start looking for him here. He needs to leave before that happens.

So he starts to pack.

Armin climbs down the ladder to his bookshop when he hears the door click and Falco jump inside. He's panting and holding his knees, trying to catch his breath.

"What's wrong?" he asks, "why were you running?"

Falco takes a deep breath. "Eren... Yeager..." he takes a deep inhale and exhales between every word. "He... Called... And asked... If you were... Here?"

Armin paled. *Oh no.*

"And what did you say?" he asks, worried.

Falco shakes his head. "I said... I haven't seen you for a while."

Which, technically isn't a lie.

But how much time can this half truth buy for him, really?

Armin rubs his chin. "I have to leave. I leave this bookshop in your hands in my absence." he declares.

Falco's eyes widened. "What? No!" he says. "I can't take care of this place while at school!"

Armin shuts his eyes. "Well, it was nice being here... I..." he takes a deep breath. "I won't find what I'm looking for here." he realizes. "I... I will never be able to find what I'm looking for but it's ok anyway."

"I don't think you should leave..."

Armin looks at him from the corner of his eyes. "And why not?" he asks, a little challenge in his voice.

Falco rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. "I think... You talked to the people you wanted you... And I don't know what it is that you're

running away from but..." he trails off. "I think the only place you will find what you're looking for is your home."

Armin hums.

He moves to one of the cases and takes one of his grandfather's books that he's hidden there. "Hm, I'll think about it."

But that will fool no one.

Armin goes to climb the ladder back to his room, but Falco is standing still on his face, an unknown expression on his eyes.

Armin smiles to himself. "You're going to contact Eren the moment I step out, aren't you?" Armin murmurs, hugging the book closely to his heart.

Falco hums thoughtfully. "No." he says. "I'll give you a headstart."

Armin chuckles. He presses the back of his head to the wall behind him. "Oh well..." he mumbles. "... Better than nothing, I guess."

Falco's eyes go from Armin's eyes to the book he is hugging.

Falco seems to make his choice. He sits down, legs crossed, and staring right into Armin's soul. "I'm bored," he says. "... I'm in the mood for some life changing book recommendations."

Armin laughs quietly, shutting his eyes as his mind slowly blanches of any book he'd ever read.

Armin climbs back down. He chooses to sit in front of Falco and opens the book in his hands. "Well uhm... Have you heard of this poet.. Uhm..." Armin mumbles, his hand raised to wipe his eyes. "What was his name? Goodness, I'm so absent minded."

Falco mumbles quietly, he rests his head against his hand and his elbow on his knee. "It's ok," he says. "I have time."

The day Armin is set to leave for Hizuru, he stares at the pile of his grandfather's old books.

He wants to leave without a notice, there's nothing else for him in Liberio and he has to leave before one of the Paradisian military inevitably captures him.

But this time, the weight of those worn books was too much to ignore. Armin finds himself unable to carry them and condemn them to the uncertainties on his way. His grandfather gave his life to make sure they survived to see the light of the future. Armin can't be careless with them.

The ghost of a boy's curious eyes haunts Armin's mind. He smiles, he really has no other option, does he? Falco is the best person that can take care of them. Knows their value better than anyone in Paradise whom Armin has met.

Armin picks up a pen and paper,

"It's yours now, Falco." he writes and puts them over the pile. He puts his hat back on and makes sure to lock the bookshop, Falco is the only other one with the spare key.

He's the first person to show his permit and leave the city grounds in the brisk of dawn.

He steps off the ship on Hizuru.

As ridiculous as it sounds, human trafficking works best around here due to organized crime being so deeply rooted into the system. He can ask one of the gangs and, according to his research, be paired up with the nearest human trafficker available.

For a price, of course.

Armin bets he can find a deal to make his cross continents.

He will admit, He's running aimlessly.

He wasn't looking this far ahead when he decided to run away. Nor was he thinking what would happen if he was captured in Hizuru.

Shipped back to paradise, no doubt.

He asks around for the nearest beach, anywhere he can rest. The people arch an eyebrow at his request. His question is a strange thing to ask in such a busy port.

Either way, a boy shows him the way in the best of his stuttering speech.

It's 20 minutes by foot, and Armin walks all of it, a long road by the coast. He walks until he finds a spot empty enough for his liking. He walks for about an hour until he's far enough from any street or commotion. Until it's just him, the sand, and the waves of the ocean.

Wind blows through his face. Armin's violet eyes stare at the distance, the ocean is too far for his liking, so he looks around and jumps over the fence when he's sure no one is around.

He takes off his boots as he walks towards the waters. He throws them away with no care whatsoever. The sensation of wet sand under his feet makes something slow down his train of thoughts.

The next moment, his bare feet are touching the water, and the smell of salt hits his nose.

Armin closes his eyes. He raises his hands, another wave hits his feet and soaks his pants. He can't bring himself to care. He should, He's going to catch a cold otherwise.

He lets out the breath he didn't know he was holding and falls to the ground, sitting with his feet in front of him. "Man..." he whispers out loud. "... Where to, now?"

The ocean water hits his skin in another wave.

The deadly beautiful waters don't offer an answer. The gentle waves calm his mind down and allow him to zone out, and just listen to the all consuming sounds of the ocean, and the mysteries around it.

Armin thinks that maybe *maybe* if he was any other nineteen year old, he could sign up to a university, or get higher education.

The subject would definitely be related to the ocean.

Ah, what a foolish dream.

He'll be dead long before he even receives an acceptance letter from a university. Any University.

He'll be long dead before he'll ever have a chance to see Eren again.

And somehow, it's eight months too long. Too little to do anything, but too much to just wait it out.

Armin sighs loudly.

A soft but hurried sound echoes around them. Before Armin can turn to see what it is, The back of Armin's head hits the sand.

The impact snaps something awake. He wants to struggle and move away but the body above him is holding him in a death grip. "Armin!" he sighs, extremely relieved for something Armin can't quite put his finger on.

And then it hits.

Eren pulls back, and their eyes meet.

For a moment, Armin doesn't say anything. He stares in shock and wonders where he went wrong that Eren somehow found him?

He covered his tracks. *To Extreme levels* . Never once did he use his real name or allies or allow a guard to see his full face, always using the cold as a subtle excuse. No one recognized him. No one--

Armin jumps back. He crawls back and away from Eren while never breaking eye contact. "Do you-- Do you have a tracker on me or something?!?"

Eren smiles almost bitterly. "I can feel you wherever you go, when you're carrying my heart around like that."

"This is serious!!"

"I am serious!!" Eren says back, a little louder. "Don't worry, I came alone. No one knows I'm here."

"No one?" the blond asks, his shoulders dropping a little.

"No one." the other confirms as he stands up to his feet. "I knew you wanted to be alone."

Armin stands up as well, but he keeps the distance between them the same. He awkwardly pats away the sand on his wet pants just to have an excuse to avert his gaze.

"But forget about that..." Eren says slowly. He raises both of his hands in a little surrender sign. "You owe me an explanation, don't you think?"

Armin stares at the sand.

He does, He really does.

(He wants to laugh at the irony of it all. He blamed Eren for not opening up to him in the other timeline about his memories of the future. And now that he's in his shoes he can't force himself to say even a word.)

Annoyed, Eren crosses his arms. "So we're in silent treatment now, huh?"

That sends a chill down Armin's spine. "No! No, I-- I just can't find the words to-to say it."

"Funny because I thought words were your virtue."

Armin shuts his eyes. "You're not helping."

"I'm not because I'm afraid, I'm deathly afraid." Eren points a hand at his own chest. "Every single person on paradise warned me that you wouldn't be the same after torture. First you lost your memories and now-- and Now you won't even talk--talk to-- to me!" Eren stops to take a deep breath as his voice starts to shake. "Armin, I'll ask you one question. Please tell me the truth."

Eren takes a step forward. "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" he asked, straight to the point.

The boldness of it takes Armin by surprise. "I uh..."he wants to say no but hasn't he been in a prolonged suicide since the moment he stepped back in time? But no, that doesn't answer Eren's question. "I wasn't planning on killing myself." he says, his eyes softened. "But there is something you need to know. I'm dieing, and I have about eight months left."

Eren fists his hands on his sides. "You won't die, then," he says. "Is it about that deal with Ymir?"

"No," Armin lies, because he doesn't want Eren fighting with Ymir *again* .

"Why are you so sure?"

"I just am."

"Did the doctors tell you?"

"... Not exactly."

Eren runs a hand through his hair and pulls them back. "Will you just tell me what's happening?" he demanded.

Armin looks away. "There's nothing."

"You ran away! Something is bothering you, Armin."

The winter chill runs through his body but Armin doesn't let it show. Even here near the beach, it's cold. The sun is setting behind them, another day coming to an end.

Armin hugs himself, looking away from Eren. His short hair has barely grown since he was rescued. But he still fists his hands in them just like he always does when he's stressed.

Eren can barely hold it anymore. "You're lying. Please tell me what's wrong-- I know--"

Armin sighs. "Fine, I'll tell you. Just don't ask anymore." he growls. "The Marleyans, they injected some poison or something. They said I wouldn't live for long."

Eren doesn't have to have future memories to know that's a lie. A bad one at that. A lie aimed just to change the subject.

"Marley is gone. Even when you were their prisoner--"

"Eren. Please. Stop."

For once, Eren plays into his manipulation. "Fine then... Let's do what we promised we'd do when we were kids." he says suddenly. "I don't believe you. Nothing's going to happen to you."

Eren's voice takes him off guard.

Armin stares at the beach in front of him, his eyes wide and his tongue unsure of how to voice his next words. "You mean... Our... Dream..." he whispers, not sure if Eren can hear him or not.

Eren does.

The next moment, warm hands turn him around and cup his face. Thumbs caress under Armin's eyes and all Armin can see is Eren's

jade green orbs staring back at him with determination. Eren smiles as softly as he can possibly manage.

Armin's face is dry under his hands. Impossibly so. But Eren keeps caressing him, leaning just a little to kiss the blonde's forehead. "Our dream." he repeats, his eyes never shaking. "Let's do it. We're free, aren't we? Let's go explore as much as we can. Hizuru sounds like a good place to start right?"

The world is wider than they can travel.

Armin's shaking hands act on their own accord. He puts them on Eren's and Eren closes his eyes with a relieved sigh. "Armin..."

"I..." Armin murmurs. "I want..."

Eren hums, he has to summon a little bravery for what he says next. "If it's rotting, let us rot together. If it's flourishing, let us bloom together. But never let this fragile wind of life tear us apart." Eren Whispers.

Armin raises an eyebrow. "Since when are you good at literature?"

Eren chuckles. "Picked it up from one of the books Dina likes to read," he says. "So? What do you say?"

Eren leaned closer until his forehead was touching Armin's.

"You quoted it wrongly, it doesn't even rhythm properly."

"You get the memo, right?"

"Still doesn't change the fact that you quoted it wrongly."

Eren Pulls back a little to be face to face. "I haven't heard an answer." he says, crooking a smile. "I have a hotel reservation for two, a bag of money and a lot of resources all thanks to Mikasa. What Do you say to this proposal, Armin Arlert?"

Ah, So Eren had been planning this?

He's been planning to travel the world with Armin and...

Armin wants to be selfish.

So he smiles and says, with a heart overflowing with pure joy: "Lets do it! Let's travel to Hizuru. See how much we can find. Then travel the world."

"... And be Free." Eren completes. "We can start from here! It looks like a great beach to start!" Eren put his hands on his hips. "We take a lot of time to take things slow!"

Armin giggles. "Sure!"

Eren throws his hands in the air. "We have a hotel for the next three days so Hizuru is ours for the next three days at least."

Armin smiles at that, but then he narrows his eyes. "Do I want to know where you got that money from?" Armin whispers.

Eren chuckles and throws his hand over Armin's shoulder to pull him closer. "Stole some from Mikasa, she won't mind." he whispers it in Armin's ear. "She doesn't use her Azumabito Allowance anyway."

Armin lets it slip.

Everything in their vacation is thanks to Eren seeing this far ahead. It makes Armin wonder if he saw this in his future memories.

He shrugs the thought away.

He has eight months ahead of him to enjoy. Who cares about anything else?

Deep breath

For the next two chapters, Eremin are going to travel around the world *For real* and not paths mumbo jumbo because I say so xD and that unfortunately means alot of complications and fluffy times.

Don't forget to COMMENT or leave a KUDOS to make the author happy!

Around the world in eighth months.

Chapter 30: Around the world in eighth months.

Ah hehe *laughs awkwardly*

I need to adress this as the story is nearing its end. This was never meant to be a happy fic, from the very start. But then again it was not meant to be depressing either. So pleaaase pay attention as you move to the next chapter.

Anyway, have this chapter of Eremin traveling around the world! I was planning on including more stuff but I ran out of time and can't waiiiitttt until I finish this fic to this ended on the short side of chapters.

Anyway, Enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The information disclosed on this section of the book won't be as accurate as the rest. Armin Arlert simply stopped updating his diary after he left Hizuru, Many believe it was due to the fact that his deal with Ymir Fritz was quickly expiring and there was no reason to keep writing it. Others believe he did write a journal of it, and discarded it before his adventures finished. The reason for that might be that Armin Arlert wanted to keep what happened between him and Eren Yeager a secret.

Historians have debated over this for a long time. Yours truly doesn't believe any of the theories above are correct. For one, there are records of Armin Arlert writing down quite a lot about his travels, just not as strictly and seriously as he would a

political journal. Few of his handwriting survive to this day. If he did destroy this whole journal, why did he let the rest of them from before this time and date stay intact?

Factually speaking, The only person who ever tried and succeeded in destroying the evidence from those travels, was Queen Historia II, who confiscated the Hizuran passport in their name and destroyed it. Many believe Eren Yeager had asked her to do it since he himself was unable to.

Despite the effort erasing their travels from History, enough evidence has been left from those times to prove that Eren Yeager and Armin Arlert traveled over 20 countries together. Some photos, souvenirs, and letters that were with Princess Mikasa of the Azumabito at the time, have escaped Queen Historias II's wrath and lives to this day. The evidence mentioned above, with the records from Hizuru, are what we will be relying on for the rest of this book.

Without further pause, please enjoy the rest, as we are approaching the tragic end of what some people call a love story.

The Hotel Eren stays in is nothing short of prestigious.

The superb lobby is what gets Armin's attention at first, and then the worker shows Eren the way and asks if Armin is going to stay his guest. Eren immediately takes Armin without stopping. They take the elevator, and the man working in it doesn't bat an eye.

The room itself is nothing short of extraordinary, the size of their old rooms in the Paradisian royal castle, and has a view to the ocean.

Eren shuts the door closed behind them. The banging sound of it pulls Armin back into reality. "Mikasa reserved this place for me." Eren says in lieu of his question. "Sorry by the way-- it took too long for me to say farewell to everyone."

farewell?

"Eren, did you run away?" Armin asks seriously.

Eren turns around from the door, he makes an annoyed face. "Of course not. There were just a lot of loose ends. Some details with the founding titan, really. I had to heal Jean, or attempt to." Eren shrugs, waving his hand dismissively in the air.

Armin's eyes widened. "You healed Jean!?"

"Attempted to--" Eren rephrases. "When I left paradise he was still in a coma."

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. That made sense, Eren could have used the founding titan as a last resort. Jean has been in a coma for a very long time.

"Then Historia and Ymir wanted a kid." Eren rolls his eyes. "Which of course-- is biologically impossible without the founder."

Armin wants to smack himself across his face. He totally forgot about that. The baby! Historia's baby. Whom Armin had a good guess was Eren's in the other timeline. Now though... "Hold up--" Armin raises his hands. "--come again?!?"

Eren arches an eyebrow. "You told Dina that the power of the titans will vanish on the third day of fall. She was planning to tie up the loose ends. Historia didn't want to risk what you said being true..." Eren says vaguely. "She asked if the baby thing was possible. Dina theoretically said. And Historia wanted to practice that theory." Eren hums. "It took a while."

Before Armin can open his mouth again, Eren takes his hand and pulls him towards a window. He opens the curtains and points at what looks like a random mountain to Armin. "You know what that is?"

There's snow on the mountain he's pointing at, a little taller than the rest but still blends in with the white snow. "No." Armin answers truthfully.

Eren smiles. "That is a volcano." he says. "Remember that book? One of the things we promised to see, The molten rocks. We can find it there."

Armin blinks in surprise. "You can't be serious."

"I am."

"Well I... I don't have any hiking equipment."

"I do." Eren nods. "I packed for both of us. I asked around and there was a small eruption a few weeks ago. If we're lucky, we can find some-- what's the word-- magma, out there."

"I'm pretty sure that's not how this works." Armin whispers awkwardly.

Eren's smile doesn't waver, it's so confident and happy that it cracks through Armin's doubts. "We'll get someone to help. The hotel reception said they knew some people."

Armin tilts his head. "Really?"

"Yes." Eren gently puts his hands over Armin's shoulder. His hands slide down to hold him by his arms. "How about a nice bath, it's a long way from Liberio to here huh? And you're not wearing it because of the weather."

Armin hums. He's right, Armin did not wear his thickest coat although the weather is nothing short of freezing. Eren gently pushes the coat off of him and guides him to a room Armin can only assume is the bathroom.

"Yeah... It sounds good..." he mumbles. He shrugs off his coat and Eren catches it from his hands.

"You get in the bath, I'll need to check on where your suitcase ended up."

Armin laughs awkwardly. "It doesn't really matter," he says. "There was nothing of value in there anyway..."

Eren shakes his head. "I know but I still need to check." he runs to the door and waves goodbye at him. The door closes with a small sound and Armin is left alone in the room.

Instead of using this odd privacy to explore the room, the deep ache and weariness in his bones just pleads for a prolonged warm bath. For all its advances, Liberio still lacked so many of the luxuries Armin is ashamed to admit he's grown used to.

Armin walks into the bath place, the tub in the middle immediately catches his attention. He's not surprised, this hotel was most likely made to suit Marleyan guests, which meant their rooms were also accommodated for them.

Armin passes the double sinks and opens the warm water, it starts to pool at the tub. He smirks to himself as the bath starts to fog.

He can almost forget the cool waters of the ocean he was in moments before.

Armin takes his clothes off and pays no mind to where they drop, they are old and only a nuisance if they truly want to travel around the world.

travel the world.

Armin looks at himself in the mirror, he hasn't noticed how long his hair has gotten. It's been a while since he trimmed it. Only a while until it's longer than his teenage style. The only difference would be the gray hairs caused by stress.

since when?

He massages his scalp, thinking about the past day.

So... Eren found me...

and he wants to travel around the world.

How??

Armin visibly rolls his eyes. If Eren sets his mind to something, he can't stop him. A lesson he learnt the hard way. It's his luck that this time Eren wants to travel instead of committing genocide. Armin is more than glad to run after him this time.

Armin tests the water with his hand first, it's pleasantly warm. So he steps in. Warm... Too warm... Warm enough that unknown muscles suddenly relax. Water overflows from the tub. Armin rests his head on the headpiece.

A sigh he didn't know he was holding escapes his lips.

He spends a good amount of time enjoying the gentle touch of warm water on his skin. It's a blessing, enough that stops Armin from understanding the flow of time.

A knock on the door wakes Armin up suddenly. "Come in-" he says before he can stop himself.

Eren opens the door. Their eyes lock once again and neither say a word. Eren steps in, he closes the door behind him. He sits on the edge of the tub. "Sorry, I just have something you might like." Eren says, waving the bottle in his hand awkwardly.

Armin blinks in surprise, then his eyes see what Eren is holding and he's even more surprised. "You brought my... Shampoo?"

"Yes, your hair type is very fragile and from the looks of it..." he says, vaguely pointing at Armin's hair. "I was right."

Armin touches his hair, subconsciously. "You mean I'm going bald!?" he whispers. It's a likely possibility, both his dad and his grandfather had gone bald in their early thirties, or late twenties. Armin might just be the one to break the record, some of his hair has already gone gray.

"No! No, not what I meant but..." Eren sighs. "I was just trying to be considerate." He puts the shampoo bottle over the tub. "I'll just leave this here and--"

"--No, wait." Armin says urgently, not wanting him to leave. "Can you uhm... Can you help me wash my hair?"

Eren hums. "Wash your hair?"

"Yes." he mumbles, slightly embarrassed that he can't find a better excuse.

One half of Eren pulls a smile. "My pleasure." he says.

Armin keeps his head still. Eren walks behind him, Eren can feel his shadow over his body. The bottle opens and its voice echoes in the silent bath. Armin licks his lips quietly.

Eren softly touches his hair, testing the waters before he poured the shampoo and started to massage his scalp.

"Dirty..." Eren whispers. "Don't you have any hygiene in Marley?"

Armin leans back, Eren masterfully runs his finger over his hair and over his scalp. He hums constantly. "I don't know... You tell me..." Armin yawns. Then he turns his head up to smile sheepishly at Eren. "Did Falco tell you everything?"

Eren clicks his tongue. He pushes Armin's head forward. "Dirty." he repeats.

Armin hums back. The massage on his scalp made him drift off to a pleasant rest.

Giant stones roll under his foot.

The snow around him has melted and frozen once again. Armin can slip at any of them, and it's not a rare occurrence.

Eren offers a hand. "Don't stop now, We're almost there!" he laughs.

Armin takes Eren's hand and climbs up from a large stone with Eren's help.

In Front of them, an old man is their instructor. He shows them the way over the black stones like it's his home. The weather is cloudy but the old man assured them there is no rain now. "We should have our breakfast here." he says. "Were getting closer, and we need all the energy we can get."

Armin is all too eager to agree.

The breakfast is simple. Some rice (which is bizarre for Armin this time in the morning) and tea.

The breakfast is followed by another four hours of climbing until they sit down for lunch. Another three hours later, and by this point, Armin can hear the smoke in the air, and the instructor tells them they are near.

When they do reach the nearest magma to them, the sun is setting but the bright red light coming from the lava is enough to shine the place.

Eren and Armin stare at the molten rocks in stunned silence. Armin's eyes follow the lava from its source to the way it crosses the stones like a river and slowly dies out by the end of it and freezes to stone.

"It's beautiful..." Armin mumbles.

It feels real.

Armin can't get any closer to it because the heat won't let it. He can already feel the molten rocks emit heat far beyond his fragile skins can handle.

But Eren doesn't have that common sense. He steps closer to the molten rocks and holds his hand to touch it. Armin gasps and pulls Eren's hand back. "You idiot, you can melt your hand off!" he yells.

Eren laughs it off. "I can regrow it and--"

Armin looks at the instructor from the corner of his eyes, and then narrows them dangerously. Eren nods, his titan shifter will remain a secret.

Eren clears his throat. "Hey, can you take a picture of us?" Eren asks the old man. He pulls out his camera and sets it up. "Just push this button when we're ready and it'll print save the picture for later."

The old man nods. Eren jumps next to Armin and holds him close by his shoulder. Both of them smile at first, but it takes five minutes for the instructor to take a picture.

(Later, they'll learn that their eyes are closed in the photo.)

"Great, now we need to leave." says the old man as he gives Eren his camera back. They both agree.

The instructor shows them a shorter, albeit more dangerous, shortcut down the mountain. He eventually orders them to stop to have dinner.

However, instead of opening his dinner, Armin opens the map of the world and puts it in front of Eren. The genuine pulse of emotions he felt from seeing the magma upclose makes him giggle. "Eren... About the rest of our plans..." he says, biting his lip.

Eren rubs his chin. "I mean... We have a lot of time... We can literally travel all around the world if we want to..."

"So we can start from Hizuru and then..." Armin trails off. Then what? Their options are so vast it's crippling his choice. Should they go north, south? East, west? The only unavailable option to them was Marley and some countries in the West known for having bad blood with Hizurans.

Other than that...

Eren hums. "I have an idea." he whispers. "Let's write down all we want to see. Then we can make a travel plan. Let's start. I really want to see the dessert."

"A dessert?" Armin gasps.

"Why not?"

"I don't think that's a good idea. A read a lot of horror stories about desserts-- well one certain dessert-- back in Marley!"

Eren grins. "That's the whole point. Adventure, freedom with you, am I right?"

Armin rolls his eyes. He writes, "Desert," above the map. Armin taps the pen to his chin. "What was it uhm... Was it called the northern lights?"

"The whole colorful lights thing? The ones that look like curtains?"

"Yeah..."

"Yup, it's the northern lights... And it's far too north. It's near Marley. I think it's gonna be a warzone by the time we get near the poles."

Armin shakes his head and writes "Northern light" and then "Northpole"

Eren blinks in surprise. "Northpole? I guess I should pack warm then." he laughs to himself. "Alright, what about uhm-- these-- these

uhm what was their name? Ah, Rainforest! I've heard all about these wicked creatures that live there!"

"Alright, but we're not getting inside, I don't plan on getting killed."

Eren gave him a grin from ear to ear. "Hah, as if death has ever stopped either of us."

Armin rolls his eyes. "You... Have a point."

"Strange, you are the only tourists who have no intentions to visit the sacred seven." the old instructor says, as he slowly eats his own food.

Armin tilts his head. "Sacred seven?"

The old man nods. "The sacred seven refers to the seven historical monuments from human civilization from the pre-titan era."

"Huh, I didn't know anything remained from the pre-titan era?" Armin whispers. "Can you help us with that?"

He nods. "Ah, of course." he says as he touches his beard. "Although, three of them are under Marley's hands now. So you should focus on the other five. One is here in Hizuru. Well, the direct translation would be the "boiled rice" temple but don't go around saying that. The other is in Greece. The other three... Well, I suppose you would call them... The triple pyramids, the Red palace... and Partpolis." The man finishes.

Eren hums.

"But our time is sacrace, we need to prioritize the natural ones over the manmade attractions." Eren reminds him. "I say we move west, from Hizuru all through the continent, then we take it north. Up there we'll make a U-turn and show up in Hizuru. All in Eight months!"

All around the world.

In eight months.

wicked can't even come close.

"Calculate everything very carefully, young man." the old man says.
"Like this journey. We should start moving, or we won't return until after moonrise."

Armin quickly picks up his map and shoves it back into his backpack. He'll make it work, it has to work.

This'll be perfect.

"Port B, Armin, Port B." Eren repeats.

"Well it's not in the Latin alphabet!" Armin shoots back, pointing at the board with Hizuran writing style. "I don't know if this is port B or not... We should ask around."

For the first time, they both decided to pack light. This allows them to run easily.

They did find the port and their ship. Most importantly, the Azumabito representative is supposed to meet them there. The ship that is going to take them out of Hizuru and into the southern continent is a superb blue and black ship.

Armin spots the Azumabito waiting for them by their clan sign. They say hello and the Azumabito is straight to business. "Lady Mikasa wants me to tell you to be careful." he says. "These are your permits under Hizuru. They are valid for the next two years. Your names, However, are your own."

Armin accepts the piece of paper with too much enthusiasm, this was real. *it's happening*, and yet Armin can't help but compare how impossible it all felt in the other timeline.

Well, you reap what you sow!

That's what his grandfather would have said.

"Thank you," he says, bowing his head. "Thank you, Mr Azumabito."

"Feel free to use it as you please," he says.

Eren laces their hands together, hand in hand. Armin meets his eyes, it's shining with hope and joy.

it's happening.

To Historia,

You -ordered told me to write a letter as soon as I could so you could have a "wild guess" where we could be. I intend to stand on my word and currently, Armin and I are spending our last day on Hizuru.

Well, we're going away tomorrow. If Dina asks, just tell her we're traveling around the world and will be doing that for the next eight months. Our next destination is Nadia, the southern continent. Very far, but we're expected to be there in about two weeks. We're going to have more than a few stops there. Armin changed the plan last minute so we can enjoy what this place has to offer to its fullest. The captain of the ship said under normal circumstances he would have advised us against taking a boat there. But the country between Hizuru and Nadia is a famous ally of the Marleys, so he told us to sign up for a caravan to pass the dessert to Nadia after we land on the port.

Armin is going to plan and budget the rest of the vacation while we're on the ship so I'm afraid I don't know the destination after that. It's a part of the adventure, right? I trust Armin more than I trust myself. And he's so eager for this vacation, the look in his eyes is so beautiful, so powerful that it makes me feel like the freest man alive.

*We're going to visit everything we dreamed of since we were kids.
That's a fact.*

How's Ymir? How's the baby? I hope you don't face problems on the way. Just remember any complication you do run into is NOT my fault. I did advise you against the whole baby thing.

I will send a separate letter to my mother and Mikasa, but if somehow that doesn't reach the castle, send them my regards!

-wish me luck,

Eren.

Armin Arlerts notes,

Presumed date: 18th Feb, 854.

[Attachment photo: a photo of Armin and Eren Yeager hand in hand in front of a noticeable black ship. Arlert is trying to smile while Yeager is covering his eyes from the sun and his face isn't completely visible.]

Off to Nadia.

Presumed date: 21st Feb, 854.

[Attachment photo: a photo of Armin Arlert in front of a camel. He's standing a few feet away from fear, while a man in plain white clothing holds the camel.]

Presumed date: 21st Feb, 854.

[Attachment photo: Eren on top of a sand mountain, his head and face covered. He's holding his hands in the air.]

I'm a bad photographer.

Presumed date: 22st Feb, 854.

[Attached photo: a view of the sand desert, the distant outlines of a city can be seen.]

Nadia, a city I can't pronounce the name of, Finally. Will take the first train south into the rainforest ASAP!

Armin has never felt a feeling of nausea and tiredness this bad in his life.

The rainforest thrill lasted less than 24 hours. Before the first day was over and Both were back from a tireless day, Armin started feeling sick. One of his eyes started to swell, and his headache impossibly.

The doctor that arrived at their hotel only shook his head and said he's had an allergic reaction to one of the food or a bug. He said this was normal with foreigners. He said it would go away on its own. It didn't. Armin had to go to a hospital and was released two days later, but still ordered to rest at their hotel.

The Eren of the paths threw the biggest fit he ever had when he appeared in the paths.

"Some soup for the sick..."

Armin barely opens his eyes. The wet cloth over his forehead makes his head much heavier than what he's used to. He laughs silently. "That's where you disappeared to..." he mumbles.

Eren puts the soup and bread next to Armin on the bed. "My moms recipe." he explains as he cuts the bread and dips it into the soup. "Although some of the ingredients were... Hard to find."

Armin mumbles incoherently. Eren smiles and helps him sit up, "You haven't eaten for a while." he says. "So don't even think about not eating this."

Armin pouts. Before he can protest, however, Eren feeds him a spoonful of soup.

Armin Arlerts notes,

Presumed date: 10th march, 854.

[Attachment photo: a photo of Armin Arlert in his hospital bed, holding a peace sign with two fingers and a tired smile.]

Presumed date: 15th march, 854.

[Attached photo: Armin Arlert and Eren Yeager in front of a superb gate, the colors are black and white in the photo. Relieved smile can be seen on both of their faces.]

Feels good to be in an actual city again.

Dear Mom,

I'm sorry for not writing a letter sooner. Armin and I had to pass through some warzones that took longer than we expected. We're safe in Nadia now, Nadia as a whole country isn't still participating in the war although it's more on the allied West's side than Marleys. So it's safer for us with Hizuru passports than anywhere else we've been lately.

I'm fine, the food here is Nadia is way too seasoned for my liking but the foreign taste is good. Armin had some food poisoning yesterday and turns out he's allergic to something. He had another allergic reaction to a bug bite a few days ago too, so he's hospitalized but he'll be discharged tomorrow. I haven't left his bedside since.

Oh, I just told him I'm writing a letter to you, he said hello.

I have yet to have a reaction to anything, allergic or otherwise. I think we have dad to thank for that. The doctor says Armin's constant unease is due to his weak immune system, born of a weak genepool. Probably mine is broader thanks to Dad being a Marleyan. First time that's useful, huh.

Anyway, back to the travels!

We went to some interesting places I hope you could see. Did you know the desert between Nadia and the coast meets the ocean? The view was absolutely breathtaking, I'll send the photo we took. Then, we had to ride a camel to the nearest city, because the railway system was damaged in Marley's latest attack. I can't even begin to describe a camel. I thought it was a small-class Titan at first. Both of us did. Armin asked all sorts of questions about the creature but I just asked for a horse and they said no.

How are you? How is Mikasa? I hope everything is going alright for you at home.

With love,

-Eren.

Armin Arlerts notes,

Presumed date: 20th march, 854.

[Attached photo: Eren Yeager and Armin Arlert in front of a palace painted in all white.]

I love the lore behind this castle. Apparently, the king built this castle to be his wives final resting place. Beautiful, beautiful and bittersweet.

Presumed date: 25th march, 854.

[Attachment photo: Eren Yeager staring at a playing board with a local man sitting in front of him. The man looks at the camera with a happy smile.]

Eren found a friend in the locals, We're invited to a strangers wedding. He had an argument with someone, he was the stranger's uncle. We are now uninvited from this man's wedding.

Presumed date: 30th march, 854.

[Attachment photo: Eren and Armin at a local beach, small fishing boats can be seen in the distance, Armin is hiding behind a hat and covering every inch of his body while Eren is in a swimsuit. Both are smiling at the camera while holding each other close.]

Happy birthday, Eren!

Presumed date: 12th april, 854.

[Attached photo: Armin Arlert and Eren Yeager in front of ruins of an ancient city, they stand in front of what can be assumed as a statue of a half lion, half bird creature.]

The locals told us not to leave this country without visiting these ruins. It's nice, it's one of those monuments older than titans by a thousand years.

"I am NEVER riding on that creature again." Eren declares, he stumbles to stand on his two feet again.

Armin gets off and thanks the leader of the caravan. He shoots Eren angrily. "Eren-- you can't just-- didn't you see how much they like their camels?" he reminds him.

"That doesn't mean I need to like it!" Eren growls, glaring angrily at the animal. Somehow, the kind camel returns the angry glare.

Armin takes a long sip from his water. His water bottle finishes quickly and Armin has to fill it for the tenth time that day.

The hotel is near an oasis that Armin knows well. He can also see the oasis in the middle of those small towns, many of the buildings and tents were set around the waters.

There can be no life without water after all.

Armin's shoulders and face have started to itch since the moment they left Nadia. The camels and the long long days in the desert did him no good.

Eren takes his hand, which is a reflex at this point of their travels. They walk to the hotel, the inside is significantly cooler than it's outside. Armin almost sighs in relief when the fan's air hits his face.

The man behind the reception smiles politely at them. "Hello, welcome to the heart of the desert hotel," he says, Armin and Eren both nod. "An ID and your marriage certificate please."

Armin and Eren exchange a long look. "Marriage certificate?" Armin mumbles. "We're... Not married."

The man shakes his head in disappointment. "I'm sorry, due to local laws, we cannot allow an unmarried man and a woman in a room." he says. "But you can have two separate rooms."

Armin blinks in surprise. "Man and a--" his eyes widened. "I'm not a woman! I'm a man."

Armin pulls his hair back, it's even longer now and...

He thought he's grown past the stage where people mistook him for a woman.

The man's eyes widened. "I'm so sorry, excuse me sir, with your long hair I just assumed." he trails off. "I'll give you your room. Excuse me. Excuse me."

Eren hums. "Somehow that law doesn't make much sense to me..." he elbows Armin playfully. "Don't you think?"

Armin rolls his eyes. He puts their passports on the counter. The man at the reception writes down their names and reluctantly gives them a key. "Don't forget the comet shower tonight!" he tells both of them.

"Comet shower?" Eren asks.

"Yes, I heard it on the radio. It appears there will be one tonight!" the man waves it off. "See it, it does happen very rarely."

They both nod and say farewell.

The moment Eren puts the key in and opens the door, Armin doesn't care at all about the state of the bed, he throws his body over the bed.

His skin on his shoulder and neck starts to throb painfully.

"Armin?!?" Eren mumbles. "Are you alright?"

Armin puts his chin over his hands. "I think I got sunburnt again..."

Eren takes a deep breath. He silently searches through his bag and finds a bottle.

Eren sits down next to him on the bed. He shakes the oil bottle a few times. "Want me to rub some oil on you?"

Armin turns his head. "Yeah..." he whispers. "It kinda hurts a little..." he forcefully pushes himself up and takes off his shirt.

Eren curses under his breath at the extent of the burns on Armin's shoulder. Armin lays down again and Eren immediately gets to work. He curses again when Armin hisses at the first contact.

"Does it kill you to wear sunscreen?"

"It's not enough! And it takes too long. It's been a while since I've cared about my appearance."

"This is a health matter not your appearance!!" Eren yells angrily. "Your skin *is peeling off!!*"

Armin rolls his eyes. "Relax. It happened all the time when I was a kid, remember? It's just an extreme version now." he mumbles. "If you don't mind, the burn is still irritating and the oil really does help."

Eren huffs but keeps pouring the oil on his skin and massaging his shoulder. Armin hums happily with a sheepish smile. "I should forget my sunscreen more often..."

"Hey! That's--"

But Eren's rambling is cut short when their door is knocked. It's a servant. He gives him a letter and tells them it arrived this morning and were told to wait until a guest by their names arrived. Eren thanks the servant but quickly shuts the door in his face.

Sensing the sudden change, Armin sits up. Eren is tense, he sits down on the bed while staring wide eyed at the letter.

"What's that?" Armin asks slowly.

"A letter..." Eren answers. "From Historia..."

"A letter? From Historia!?" Armin shouts. "How did she--"

Eren chuckles. "She's terrifyingly resourceful when she wants to be."

Armin couldn't agree more with that. He rested his head on Eren's shoulder as they both stared at the letter.

Eren opens it and they both start reading.

Good Evening,

Or should I say Good morning? I have a good guess this letter is going to find you in the evening when you're probably having severe food poisonings. I'm not writing this letter to criticize your questionable life choices, but actually I'm writing this to give you some interesting news.

To answer your frequent questions, Ymir and I are alright. The pregnancy has proven to be quite the challenge for me but Ymir is always next to me to help me out. In our latest visit to the doctors, the doctor said there are no problems for me to give birth naturally. Although that does sound painful, it is a relief. Dina says the gender of the baby is 100% female due to it being mine and Ymir's, since we are both women. I don't quite believe her but her argument looks sound. Either way, Ymir has picked wonderful names for both boys and girls and gender neutral, we'll see which one will fit the baby best when it's born. I'm due in late October.

Anyway, Happy birthday. I bet I have missed it by now but I wish you the best, I will give you your present once you return to paradise.

You're the godfather, get your ass back in Paradise when the time has come. I don't want to argue with Connie over this because he thinks as Ymir's friend he deserves a spot as the baby's godfather.

Best wishes.

The comet shower did happen.

The both of them enjoyed it from the ground, lying comfortably down on the sand. The sand has grown colder because of the night, but it's more bearable than its warm counterpart.

And both of them will need to scrub the sand out of their hair tonight.

But it will be worth the view, of a thousand shooting stars lighting the sky at once.

Armin loves it, he loves getting lost in the rush of each shooting star.

"It's beautiful..." he mumbles.

"Yeah..." Eren whispers. "Not even founder Ymir can make such a beauty..." Eren smiles to himself. "It just makes me realize how small we are." Eren whispers with a shrug. "Even with all the power of the founding titan in my hands, there are a lot of things I couldn't change... And something I could change, Albeit with a too heavy price."

Armin hums.

He knows this feeling. When he first traveled back in time, he thought he could change many things. Deep down he knew he had to keep his heart guarded and focus on certain goals, but he ended up changing far too many things and not changing others. Like Marco, Sasha, and countless other soldiers are still dead.

But small miracles did happen, Like Ymir, Carla and...

Armin looks to his side, and watches Eren stare at the comets.

"What are you gonna do after?" Eren asks suddenly.

Armin blinks in surprise. "After?" he mumbles.

"Yeah, after." Eren meets his eyes. "After the power of the titans disappears. Are you going back to paradise? What's your plan for the future."

There is no future for me . He realises a cold sensation running through his body.

"Nothing." he says instead. "Let's just focus on the time we have, ok? I don't want to think about anything else."

Eren looks back up at the sky. "You shouldn't think that you're still young. You're barely twenty!"

Armin rolls his eyes. "I'm not the one who has extra life now. What are you going to do after you lose your titan on the third day of fall?"

Eren smiles, bitterly. "Hm, guess I'll just watch what you'll do."

"That's an even worse answer than mine."

"We'll see, Armin, We'll see."

"Forget about that, look up, Eren... It's beautiful..." Armin whispers.

Eren gently pushed a strand of Armin's hair behind his ear, and watched his fascinated eyes. "I know something more beautiful." he murmurs, too quiet for Armin to hear.

The commets dance above them for another hour, their beauty marks permanently in their minds.

Next chapter: The 3rd day of fall, 854.

3rd day of fall.

Chapter 31: 3rd day of fall.

It's the third day of fall. Everything unravels.

long loud relieved sigh

We're here, we're finally here.

First and foremost, thank you all readers for coming until this point! Thank you all for your support and kudos and comments and all your encouragement through hard times. Thank you all☆☆ I went through some strange stages of my life while writing this fic which is why it's like this lol

This is the climax of the story, haha, so please be careful and pay attention to what the whole theme was in this story. Please please know this is a fanfic and it was supposed to hurt from the start. Do not take this seriously if you're feeling down, sad, or depressed.

A whole lot of people got close to guessing what the plot twist will be. I like to think I did a good job about it lol. DON'T FORGET TO SCREAM AT ME IN THE COMMENTS.

WARNIING

WARNING

MAJOR CHARACTER DEATH, i repeat. MAJOR CHARACTER DEATH + blood. Proceed with caution.

((Please heed the warnings))

Before,

Paradise Island.

Mikasa was at her shift in the southern shores watchtowers when Eren found her, seemingly for no special reason.

His presence didn't go unnoticed. The rumors about his presence reached the watchtower before he himself did. So Mikasa was expecting it.

Eversince Hange sent her south, Mikasa has been one of the people in charge of this fairly new watchtower. It was located in the same place Marley first attacked on and where Marley turned the patriots into titans.

Hange reasoned that it was Paradise's first line of defense if Marley thought of attacking again. That's the official reason, but with Levi on a "Secret" mission until an indefinite time, Mikasa assumed Hange wanted to keep their heavy hitters away from Dina's rage because of their involvement with Zeke's death.

Mikasa saw Eren and his horse approach from afar. She didn't know how to feel, if to feel relieved, anxious, or happy to see him. But he did reach the watchtowers and the border. Mikasa stayed on the top floor of the wooden watchtower and asked one of the soldiers to show the way up for Eren.

They did, a few minutes later Eren had climbed up the stairs with an expressionless look on his face. "Hi there..." he said. "We need to talk."

She arched an eyebrow. "What's wrong? Is something wrong in the capital? With mother?"

Eren raised both of his hands. "No. Thank goodness no, at least not yet."

"Any news from Armin?"

"I just received a call I think I'll find Armin in Hizuru... No, I'm certain I will.."

Mikasa crossed her arms. "So you're going to go after him? Do you know where he is exactly?"

Eren smiled to himself. "I do." he looked up again, meeting her eyes but this time with a smile. "By the way, I have some good news and bad news."

"About?"

"I used the founder's power to speed up Jeans healing."

Mikasa's eyes widened. "What?"

Eren held up his hands in defeat. "That was the good news. The bad news is I did it almost a week ago and he hasn't woken up yet."

Mikasa opened her mouth to say something, but she couldn't. She could see the look of defeat on Eren's face for a moment when he talked about the, perhaps first, failed attempt with the founding titan.

He moved over to the side of the watchtower silently. Eren leaned against the railing and watched the endless waves of the ocean hit the shores.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Not when it's your job to stare at it..." She hummed. Mikasa leaned against the wall and turned her head at the same ocean. "So... When are you going to leave?" She asked. "Tomorrow morning. I'll take the first ship to Hizuru."

"Hizuru..."

"Are you willing to exchange some of your Azumabito allowance with Paradisian money?" Eren asked curiously.

She arched an eyebrow. "You have money?"

Eren frowned. "I'd be pretty resourceful if I say so it myself." he mumbled. "What's the exchange rate? Ah! 3000 yen for each paradisian frank, am I right?"

"Fine, alright. Just give me some time to get it from Lady Kyomi." she answered. "... So does that mean you're going to stay there for long?"

Half of Eren's face quirked a smile. "It's so long. I feel like I am never coming back." he mumbled. Before Mikasa could answer him, he turned around until they were eye to eye. "I need to ask you something."

"What?"

"Keep an eye on mom." he said simply. "Dina is lashing out at everyone over Zeke and I... I don't think they ever talked about the bad blood between them thanks to Dad." he shrugged.

"Oh..." Mikasa whispered, not knowing what else to say.

"I think I never apologized." Eren said suddenly, he stood up straight again. "For how I acted when we were kids."

Mikasa blinked in surprise. "What?"

"I was jealous." Eren admitted. "I was jealous of your strength and determination. I didn't like it when you were trying to protect me. When it should have been the other way around..."

"Oh..." Mikasa mumbled bewildered.

"I'll miss you, Mikasa." Eren admitted quietly. "Can I hug you?"

Surprised, Mikasa nods and opens her arms. They embrace and Eren holds her very tightly.

"Goodbye, Mikasa."

The goodbye is strange, and it marks a question in her mind. However, After a few minutes, he reverts to being silent and watching the ocean in front of them.

Mikasa receives a letter from the hospital on the first of march.

Jean has woken up from his coma.

She has to wait eight more hours until her shift is finished and she sends a letter to Hange explaining the situation and asking to leave the southern watchtowers. She receives permission two days after that when her replacement arrives.

When she reaches the hospital, Jean is surrounded by his family. There is a tired smile on his face and he keeps his hand away from his amputated legs, one from the other from above the knee. So Eren had forgotten to heal that.

His smile turns genuine when she sees her next to the door.

Armin Arlerts notes,

Presumed date: 1st of may, 854.

[Attached photo: Eren and Armin in front of a pyramid made of clay and bricks. The structure is big enough that they are far from it, but the full building can't be seen.]

Another monument from pre-titan Era. The guide said their civilization lost to the Eldians. Fun fact, they speak our language! It's

sad but I'm finally relieved we don't need a translator and hope they understand us anymore.

Presumed date: 7th of may, 854.

[Attached photo: Eren and Armin posing in front of a NO ELDIAN sign on the ship they are about to get on.]

How do you think these people will react if they take a blood test from us?

As the weather grew warmer, Their travels took to the north. Little by little, plains turn into mountains and deep canyons. The guard explains that this mountain range separates two continents, which they are passing.

And the more they traveled, the more they ran into more and more evidence that the Eldians had conquered here. The Marleyan footstep left behind slowly grew as well. The first obstacle was a train system that required an Eldian blood test to use.

Eren and Armin looked at each other, they both turned around and walked away from the train station and decided to walk the distance between the two cities, and see what happens.

The breathtaking view slowed them down. The sight of the world under their feet as they crossed the mountains will forever stay in their minds.

They have to camp for the night and hope no animal will attack them, which Eren points out will be nothing if he summons his titan.

The next day, they realize they have walked too much south. They reach a lake that is too far south from their original plan.

However, it's a lake with its rivers coming from the mountains. The first aspect of it that Armin notices is the colorful stones around and under the waters.

Eren plays with the map, moving it around and trying to find a way for them to stay on track, he doesn't notice Armin moving to the lake and kneeling down next to the stones, his violet eyes focused on the colorful stones the minerals in the mountains have made.

And then he finds it.

Armin puts his hand into the clear cold water and takes a green stone out of it. "Eren, look! It's a green rock-" Armin holds it up for Eren to see, excited like a little child.

Eren pokes his head from the map. He comes closer and puts the map away. He takes the stone from Armin's hand and inspects it. "Green, so what?" he asks.

Armin takes it from his hand and raises the stone until it's right next to Eren's eyes, just as he suspected, their colors are near. "Huh, this is funny. It's just like your eyes! What are the odds?"

It clicks.

Eren takes a long look at Armin's eyes and then looks at the lake. He searches through the stones and starts walking around the lake.

Armin laughs quietly. "Eren-- you can't find purple stone here!" he says with a shrug. "Unless you miraculously find a semi-precious gem!"

His words go completely over his head. "But I wanna find your eyes too!" Eren whines. He digs the stones a little more. His hands wrap around a stone just to toss it away with a click of his tongue. "No. No. No. Damn it."

"Eren, come on, this is close enough." Armin whispers, pulling the stone he tossed away near his face. "See, somewhat purple!"

Eren looks back, then shakes his head. "No it's not! It's a completely different shade!" he whispers.

"You can't find this shade of purple stones in the..."

"AHAH!"

Eren stands up, in his hands is a small purple gem, something in Armin's mind tells him this can be a broken piece of an amethyst.

The words die in Armin's throat.

Slowly, Eren stands up. He walks over until there isn't a distance left between them. Armin can only watch the stone Eren found dumbfounded. "Eren..." he whispers, not knowing what else to say.

Eren smiles. He caresses Armin's face with the back of his hand. Then he grabs Armin's chin slightly roughly to make him look up. Armin's eyes stay obediently downwards, even when Eren's thumb rests over his lips.

"Look at me..."

Armin does.

With a grin, Eren holds the stone near Armin's eyes. "It matches," he declares happily.

Presumed date: 13th of June,

[Attached photo: Eren next to a framed artwork in a museum. The artwork is of a man with Eren's face on his horse and a sword raised high into the air.]

Libra museum! I found Eren's doppelganger. He, too, was a suicidal maniac.

Armin never thought he'd be ok with spending so much money. Buying four tickets in a train just so that they could be alone was certainly never a part of his luxurious thoughts.

However when he thinks about the peace and quiet that means, it helps him take a deep breath and relax.

Eren puts his own bag in its place and then asks for Armin's. Armin remembers he left it out and opens their door. He wants to pick up his bag but his blood freezes when he spots a girl on the other side.

Ymir, *the founder Ymir*, is standing on the other side. She leans against the doorframe as their eyes meet and smiles. Smiles from ear to ear like a madman. "Wanna see the truth?" she says.

Armin's heart skips a beat.

Why can I see you? Hear you? Why are you here?

He wants to ask all his questions but founder Ymir disappears just as she appeared. Shaken, Armin picks his bag and shuts the door.

Inside, he notices Eren has sat down and is rubbing his shoulder, a grunt leaving his mouth.

"Eren, are you ok?" he asks, throwing his backpack away.

Eren keeps rubbing his left shoulder. "I'm ok..." he murmurs, his eyes tightly shut. "It's just a cramp."

Armin helps him back down. "It's not fair. You're carrying way too much." he whispers.

"Yeah..." Eren mumbles. "I don't think we need all that junk."

Armin hums. He sits down and lets his head rest against the window, he hopes, with the deepest parts of his soul, he would never see founder Ymir again until the day of the deal.

Presumed date: 29th of June,

[Attached photo: a fire in the middle of a camp and a tea brewing over it, a forest can be seen in the background. The photo is focused on a black eared mammal that looks like a cat with long black ears and big frame.]

Is that a cat?

Presumed date: 13th of July,

[Attached photo: Armin and Eren with a big tray full of different treats and chocolates, smiling at the camera. Behind them, a celebration can be seen with floating pieces of paper and a parade of people playing musical instruments.]

This celebration was all fun and games until we realized it was celebrating independence from the Eldians.

"So... Who made these rocks?" Eren asks the instructor as they watch the stone buildings from afar.

Their group is given an hour of free time near the monument. Although it doesn't look strange for Eren, Armin is mesmerized by the sheer history and mystery behind what Eren describes as "stones put together like some door frames with butter and brick."

The woman gives him a knowing smile. "Oh, we don't know. The name of the people are simply lost in history." she adds with a smirk. "Or-- a lot of people believe it was made by the extraterrestrials."

Armin hands Eren the camera before he can protest. "I want a photo with this!!" he declares and stands in front of the monuments and smiles at the camera. Eren hums and takes a photo with utmost care. "You have to be careful, Angel. The camera roll has space for only two more pictures."

Armin pouts. "Why only 36 pictures at a time?"

"Angel, we're lucky we could find a camera roll." he reluctantly reminds him. "By the way, why do you think this is good anyway?"

Armin's eyes widened. "Eren, this monument is thousands of years old!"

"It's not the only ancient thing we came across." Eren says as a matter of fact. Then he looks at the others in the group from the corner of his eyes. "This-- by far-- is the easiest thing to make with titan powers, but somehow they think it's the aliens."

Armin gives him a soft smile. "Oh, are you getting hurt over not getting the credit?"

Eren shrugs. "In my titan form, I can build this thing in less than an hour."

"True but... Eren..." Armin clears his throat. "This monument was made before founder Ymir ever existed."

Eren opens his mouth to say something, and then gently closes it.

Presumed date: 10th of August,

[Attached photo: Armin and Eren holding their beers in hands, they are in a pub that looks old and decorated with heads of various wild animals]

Never killed people to break some laws.

"Armin, you should be wearing a little warmer..." Eren offers.

Armin looks out of the balcony of their hotel. The cold is making goosebumps rise all over his body but he can't care to wear a coat. Eren takes off his coat and puts it over Armin's shoulders. The contact makes him shiver. "Armin..."

"I'm ok, it's not cold." Armin says, but his body betrays him as he pulls Eren's coat tighter around himself. "It's still summer."

"Yes, I know it's still summer. But it's getting cold and--"

"It's still summer." Armin repeats.

Eren's eyes soften. "I didn't know you loved summer so much. But Armin, you should start dressing warmer. September starts in two weeks."

"Don't." Armin shakes his head. "... Let's not talk about autumn, ok?"

Eren opens his mouth to say something, then he stops and shakes his head. "It'll be ok," he promises Armin.

"It will all be ok."

"What?"

The woman at the counter sighed. She pulled her blond hair out of her face and shook her head. "As I said for the past three times." she repeats. "It's summer, with short nights, you might not see it.."

Armin stares at her, dumbfounded.

The last stop at their destination, a month before his deal expires, and now this woman is telling him one of the most crucial parts of their journey might not be fulfilled.

No.

No. It can't be.

Third day of fall is in a month. A MONTH. he can't wait just to see if the sun decides to send a storm or not. Or that if Loki wants to trigger Ragnarok by sending the northern light in the shape of a wolf.

This is not--

Eren's heavy hand on his shoulder snaps him out of his thoughts. He looks back, and Eren arches an eyebrow, expecting to translate what the woman just said.

Armin swallows hard. "She says there aren't enough dark hours to see northern lights in the summer."

"Oh..." he whispers. "Well, she might be wrong, we were planning to go further north, right? Just get the keys to the room from her."

Armin grinds her teeth.

Yes, she might be wrong.

She has to be wrong.

Armin takes the keys with shaking hands.

He doesn't talk until they are setting their bed. Armin sinks into the comforting sheets and pretends to be asleep on his side with his back to Eren. The sun rolls down and the moon rises. Armin can see the nail of it from the window from where he is sleeping.

When will the last time be that I'll see the full moon?

The thought makes him wonder.

Suddenly, he feels a heavy hand moving over his arm and up to his shoulder. "Armin," Eren squeezes his shoulder. "It's going to be ok?"

Armin fists his hands over the blanket. "Yeah..." he mumbles..

In the dark, Eren moves closer until he rests his chin over Armin's shoulder, and his hands gently move over his tense arm. "Is something wrong?"

"No, No, No it's just--" Armin shakes his head. "I'm not-- I'm not ready for it to end."

A heavy beat of silence passes. Eren's hand stops. "The journey?" he asks, slowly and carefully.

Armin shuts his eyes and he nods.

"I'm not ready for-- for Fall. What if we don't finish all we wanted to see by then?"

"Don't worry about that... Or any of it." Eren assures him. "We'll see the northern lights. And it's going to be ok, nothing is going to happen to you in autumn."

Armin turns around, a bitter smile on his face. "You don't need to lie," he says. "You know about the deal, you know what it means."

Eren gently takes Armin's hand and lifts it to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to his knuckles. "I know more than you do." he says as a matter of fact. "Come on, forget about it..."

He pulls Armin close, determined to cuddle him back to sleep.

A few more towns north, Armin received the good news he wanted.

By the time they reached the town, it was noon and the people were on their work. The Inn owner spotted them and laughed when they asked for the northern lights. He said it's not guaranteed, but they did see it last night. So Armin and Eren had a good chance of seeing it tonight if they were on the right spot at the right time.

They leave the Inn when the sun sets and camp in the woods, their eyes glued to the skies and waiting for it to happen.

Neither of them say a word, or move until it happens.

Green and blue lights dance across their vision, like a curtain over the skies. Their dance, their mesmerizing dances. Armin's eyes are hypothesized by their beauty.

Eren looks just as stunned. Although, his hand slowly reaches for Armin's and holds it in a steady grip.

The blue and green lights dance in the sky for ten more minutes until they wither away, disappearing into the dark night.

After a beat of heavy silence, Eren laughs. "Heh! At least it didn't take the shape of a wolf, huh Armin?" he says. He keeps looking at the stars and sees no reaction from Armin.

He turns around just in time to see a single tear escape Armin's eyes.

"It's-- it's over." he mumbles, his violet eyes staring at the darkness.

Eren squeezes his hand.

Armin wipes his tears with his free hand, he smiles but it's watery and fragile. "We-- We did it!" he mumbles. "We--"

Eren puts his hand on his waist and pulls him closer until their bodies are touching. He leans in until their lips are a hair breadth away from touching. Armin licks his lips and lets out a shaky exhale. Armin leans in and their lips touch.

The kiss is messy with Armin's tears and his mess of emotions. He plays with Eren's hair and grips it as hard as he can. Soon, it's a dance of teeth and tongue.

The sky turns and another round of green and blue lights appear, they fall like curtains in the background. If one looked closely enough, they could see the shape of a wolf in the northern lights.

Dear Mikasa,

I hope you have been receiving my letters. Sorry for going long periods of time without updating you or mother.

Armin and I have just left our final destination. We will be returning to Hizuru and then We will be going to one of paradise's southern shores on the 26th of September. We will probably stay at the beach for a long time so you can find us at the southern beach, or some place near since it's a military place now.

How's Jean? Did he wake up?

How are you? Is everything ok? Is mother ok with Dina? Are you enjoying the scouts?

I want to hear everything but I won't be able to. So I just want you to know you're magnificent and able to overcome any obstacle that comes your way. I wish I could give you something more valuable.

Goodbye,

-Eren Yeager.

Presumed date: 20th of September,

[Attached photo: Armin and Eren on top of a mountain with the view of the mountain range behind them.]

Going back home.

Armin goes silent the moment the weather starts to get colder and colder. His eyes look hollow and stare too long at the corners of the room. Eren notices this, of course he does.

The night of September 23rd, they are on their ship back to Hizuru. Eren wakes up to an empty bed, later he finds Armin on the deck and staring at the moon in the clear sky.

Eren stands next to him silently. Armin quickly breaks the silence with a question. "At the... Third day of fall..." he whispers. "Do you think... Do you think the deal will expire in the morning? At noon? At midnight?"

Eren answers without a moment of hesitation. "At dawn. When the sun is setting." he answers.

Armin blinks in surprise. "How do you know?"

Eren smiles knowingly. "I've seen it before," he points at his head. "Future insight, remember?"

Armin sighs a shaky exhale. He buries his face in his hands and shakes his head. "Thanks." he says quietly.

"Don't think too hard about it. There are a lot of unknown variables, you know?"

Armin laughs hollowly.

He says nothing else.

Armin did not waste a moment on Hizuru.

Based on his calculation, they will reach paradise on the 26th of September, otherwise known as the third day of fall.

When the ship landed on the shores of paradise at noon, Eren automatically wanted to show his royal sign to the guard.

Armin doesn't let him.

He shows their Hizuran passports and buys the dirty looks from the guards. He mumbles something incoherent and stamps their passports and allows them past passport control.

"Why did you--" Eren wants to ask but Armin shakes his head and interrupts him.

"I have like-- four hours left to live?" Armin hugs himself like it's freezing. The phantom coldness seeps deep into his bones. "I wanna be left alone."

However, this was near the southern watchtower. To their surprise, Connie and Ymir are talking to two of the soldiers in a corner. Their eyes meet for a moment.

Connie's jaw drops. And Ymir makes a confused face. Recognition passes both of their faces.

Armin puts a finger over his lips, silently begging them to keep quiet.

Ymir narrows her eyes. She slowly nods. Armin sighs and shuts his eyes. "Thank you." he mouths as he walks away.

The moment they are out of the watchtowers, Ymir asks for a phone to call Mikasa.

Armin holds on to Eren's hand as they walk along the beach, to the west. He laughs often without making any jokes, and zones out as his eyes stare at the ocean.

Eren walks next to him, completely silent.

Suddenly, Armin stops and shrugs his backpack off of his shoulders. "I'm not going to need it." He answers Eren's unasked question and walks away from his bag.

Eren mirrors his actions and drops his bags.

Armin smiles at him, he walks backwards into the waters until the waters are up to his knees. It soaks his feet and his boots and is slightly colder than he anticipated. He reaches out a hand for Eren and the other boy accepts, standing next to him in the cold ocean.

"Hey Eren, can I ask a question?" he says, a sudden cool wind pushes his hair back and forth. His eyes stare at the orange sky, and the rapidly descending sun.

Eren hums. "What?"

"By any chance-- did you meet my grandpa before he died?"

Eren nods.

Armin chuckles. "Was he... Was he at peace? Or was he falling apart like I am!?" he laughs, almost maniacally.

Eren looks at his right, Armin stares out at the view. His eyes are old, wise, with the same spark of excitement and fear.

"I can't believe this..." Armin whispers, he lets go of Eren's hand to hug himself tightly. "The sun is setting. The sun is setting. It's the third day of fall. 854. Third day of fall, 854."

Eren reaches for the blond, he pulls him into a hug and rests his head over his chest, letting the other to lean against him. "Armin, calm down. It's going to be ok."

Armin's hands latch into his body, grips his coat and buries his face into his chest. "It's not." His voice has a calmness that his body doesn't. "It won't. It's the third day of fall and I..."

Armin freezes in his arms.

Then, his hands pull harder at Eren's much larger body. "Eren, I don't want to go." Armin whispers, his fingers clutch to the back of Eren's

shirt.

"You won't." Eren whispers in his hair. "You won't. You'll stay alive. And you'll live very very long. And when you die, you'll have a thousand wrinkles on your face and your hands will be shaking from old age."

Armin's lips quiver. "Eren..."

He pulls back, now, there is a bitter smile over his face.

"This is not something you can fight."

Eren doesn't have time to wonder what happens next.

Eren holds him back into the hug tighter than before. "And when you look back at all this, you'll say: 'I had someone that loved me so much. That stupid Eren.' you'll explain all we did to your kids or grandkids if you decide to have any."

Eren pulled back from the hug and took Armin's face into his hands. His thumb gently wiped Armin's lone tear away from his eyes. His smile was unflattering. "And when you die, I will be waiting for you on the other side, and I'll make fun of how you look when you're old."

Armin nuzzled his face into Eren's hand. What he described... Made his heart ache. Armin smiles. "You're going to do all of that, this time." he tells Eren.

"No."

"Sorry, Eren. But you can't fight my fate."

"I'd rather be six feet under than to be six feet apart from you." Eren smiles triumphantly. "The battle is already fought, Armin, and I've won." he tells him. "You won't die."

That makes Armin's eyes widen. Eren might joke and say a lot of hopeful things but then... This... This looked serious.

Armin's eyes met the falling sun, it was quickly falling behind the sea level. The sun was already halfway hidden behind the horizon.

The time was ticking.

Armin's eyes look at the sun in fear as it sinks further and further until--

"I'm sorry..."

Armin looks up over Eren's shoulders.

Eren of the paths, with that famous man bun and old cardigan of his, is steaming and turning into sand under his feet. He looks away in shame. "It was the only way..." he says and those are his final words.

Armin blinks in surprise.

Eren's, his Eren's, hands latch to him, keeping him close and caged in his embrace. "You stay away from him, it's not his time." Eren shouts, pulling Armin impossibly closer.

Armin's heart sinks into his chest. Its empty space consumes his whole chest and his head becomes blank. He turns back forcefully in Eren's arms and looks at the direction Eren is looking so angrily.

Its founder Ymir.

She's standing yards away from them, but her body is clearly visible. She tilts her head but she's not looking at Armin, she's staring at Eren.

Then her eyes fall on Armin.

Armin takes a deep breath to fight the rising heart beat in his chest.

heart beat, huh?

He swallows the lump in his throat and pulls back from Eren's arms, just enough so that he could still hold on to his shirt. "Eren, it's useless to fight it." he murmurs.

Armin's hand clutches his shirt.

"Just let me go ok?" he whispers quietly. "Isn't it better if we part ways in peace?"

"No, it's not, not like this." Eren says as a matter of fact. "I've told you a hundred times already, You won't die."

Armin looks back at founder Ymir. Just as the sun is falling, so is her body. One half of her body is steaming and falling into the sand under her feet. Her eyes are grieving. "You... Truly are a lucky lad to have someone like him." she whispers. Armin doesn't know who she's referring to.

But he has a bet.

Ymir dies with a smile on her face when the last parts of the sun sinks into the ocean and the sky is completely orange. She falls into the sand under her feet, finally taking her part of the deal and leaving this world.

Armin stares at the pile of sand on the ground, his heart doesn't beat for a long moment. The panic itself makes him his heart has stopped but then he feels a strong beat pulse through his body. Just like always. He puts his hand over his chest. "What in the--" he wants to curse but he doesn't get the chance.

Eren's hands on him lose their grip. A violent cough wracks through his body and he loses his balance.

Eren falls and Armin has just enough time to catch him. "Eren!" he shouts as he slowly pulls Eren and himself into the shores and on the ground. "Eren, what happen--"

There is a trail of blood running down Eren's smile. Another violent cough and there's more blood running down his chin. Eren's eyes meet Armin's and he smiles.

And then it drowns Armin. "Eren! Eren, you idiot!" Armin screams as he holds his head up, he immediately puts two fingers over neck and like the past ten years, doesn't detect a heartbeat.

Eren's shaking hands take his. "I--I could -ave never do-done it." Eren gasped. Armin pulled him closer.

"No--No! Don't talk, you'll--!"

Eren puts his weak hand on Armin's desperate hold. "No. I... I am... I'm ready for it. I knew--knew you could do it. " he murmured, his smile spreading until his eyes closed. "You'll be free now..."

Eren took a deep breath. And wasted it saying his final word: "Armin..."

Armin's slow *slow* brain pulls his memories. His breathing quickening and his hands holding Eren's body start to shake.

"The price you pay to go back in time will be your heart. And I take payment immediately."

"You... Truly are a lucky lad to have someone like him."

"The doctor kept changing his ear-thingies because they were broken and couldn't find my heartbeat."

"It's said whoever has the heart of the founder, has your purple eyes" -- "How can someone who doesn't have the founding titan have the heart of the founder?"

"Hm, guess I'll just watch what you'll do."

"You won't die--"

He has been so stupid.

From Eren's lack of detectable heartbeat to all that Eren said in the past month. And the changes-- the sudden changes in Armin's deal with Ymir--

"... Eren?"

The silence quietly informed him the world is too cruel to let them live it out.

Armin shakes Eren's body. "Eren..." he repeats, each time his voice growing quieter and quieter until it's a tiny whisper against the sounds of the ocean.

The violet color slips from Armin's eyes, replaced by their original blue color. The color burns away as does the titan abilities all around the world.

Eren's weight is heavy, but his silence is heavier. Armin pulls him up, just enough to bury his face in Eren's shoulder. He pulls Eren's body close to him as much as he can. Just so he won't see the lifeless jade green eyes.

Armin is vaguely aware of the water levels rising.

He doesn't notice anyone's approach until he feels Mikasa's hand on his shoulder.

She doesn't hear Mikasa suddenly gasp because he's covered in Eren's blood.

He doesn't notice Jean in the background or the other Scouts.

"this is not a crime scene."

He vaguely hears Jean argue with the others, but not enough to understand or care.

His tunnel vision can only see Mikasa because she is so-- so near. And when that's not enough, she holds both sides of his head to make him look at her.

"Armin!" she says, louder and louder until she's yelling and Armin has to answer. "WHAT HAPPENED HERE!"

Armin's blue eyes shake and he shuts them. "It was..." he gulps. "It was supposed to be *me* ."

Mikasa doesn't understand, Armin doesn't expect her to. She knows nothing. Nobody was supposed to know anything. Armin was supposed to.

"Armin, Armin, look at me." She says again when she sees him zoning out. "I need you to take a deep breath. Who did this to you!? Who did this to--"

Armin's eyes open, really open, and see Mikasa's stormy gray eyes for the first time since he left. "I killed him. It was my fault." he says, loud and clear.

With the background murmur gone, Armin realizes how many people are really surrounding him. Afraid of their gazes, he pulls Eren's body closer and doesn't hear another word that Mikasa says.

His neck stings.

Armin has half a mind to notice Mikasa's hand on his neck and the syringe she pulls out into his vein.

A sedator.

Its effect is immediate.

The Angels frown, the devils worship.

Chapter 32: The Angels frown, the devils worship.

Hahaha how are you doing?!?

Confession time! There was supposed to be a smut scene in chapter 30, but the last time I wrote smut, I had a mental breakdown and embarrassed myself so much I couldn't look at an english lexicon for a while and this time it had similar reactions. And the reason for chapter 30 and 31 being so short and this two-month long hiatus is that, lol. I'm physically unable to write smut.

I admit. It might have been better if this story did include a smut scene. But yeah, there are limits to what I can write and don't have anyone to write it for me lol.

WARNIING

WARNING

death, bodies, trial. Extreme grief. No mental health. Hallucination. And oh, disclaimer: I have never seen someone with too much grief so I had to research it up. Again, google/common sense/other fanfics is not the most reliable of sources so take this up with a huge pile of salt and keep in mind this is a fanfic!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

3rd day of fall, 854.

The entire country of paradise was on alert.

From the hospitals to the police force, the doctors to the guards. Every soul was told to await for a catastrophic event, the worst case scenario. Although neither of the common citizens understood what the precautions were all about on the third day of fall, 854.

Mikasa had long given up on understanding the game Armin was playing. As confusing as it all looked, everything played in his favor most of the time, everything other than the last game of his. Which was enough to plant seeds of doubt in people's minds, especially Queen Dina's.

It made Mikasa wonder, what had been the two of them up to the past eight months? What would have caused such a rift between the three of them that made Eren think she was better off in the dark? Eren told her he was leaving, said goodbyes like there was no tomorrow and insisted on one last family dinner with mother before he disappeared, following Armin in his quest to vanish off the face of the earth.

She expected him to be here by now. On such a crucial day that the power of the titans was allegedly going to expire. Historia had been restless, thinking something will happen to her daughter or her wife, considering both were directly linked to the power of the titans.

And Queen Dina-- in her endless worry-- placed Mikasa on her duty guard, while most of the other scouts were busy guarding the pure titans in paradise, in fear of their rampage.

Mikasa crossed her arms against her chest and stared out of the window of Historia's room. Nothing triggered her danger senses, if anything, the real danger was far far away from the palace and in the form of pure titans currently under the influence of the founding titan to stay put.

What will happen to them? Without the power of the titans, it'll be another shiganshina. This time with no walls to protect or--

A slow cry snapped her attention from the view. The little baby in her crib slowly moved and made steadily growing noises of disapproval. It broke Historia and Ymir's hushed conversation. Ymir picked her up and gently tickled under her chin. Historia, still exhausted from her labor the day before, simply smiled and rested her head against her shoulder. "I think she knows something's up." Ymir jokes. "Don't worry, little baby, you won't even know what's happening."

The girl was born weeks earlier than intended, Carla believed because of the stress Historia went under. And since we came to this world many weeks early, the stubborn baby had yet to have an official name. Although Mikasa was sure the two of them had a name planned for their daughter.

She was pulled out of her thoughts by a knock on the door. Historia allows entrance. It's Jean behind the door. He walks in and gives them a small salute. One that makes Ymir fight the urge to smoke. "I am checking on what Hange told me to." Jean said simply.

Ymir arches an eyebrow. "Is that really the right task for you...?" she trailed off, letting their imagination fill in the blanks.

"I volunteered. I wanted to help given the circumstances." Jean said blankly. "I won't be surprised if the scouts are... Short staffed... After whatever happens today."

"I hope you're still saying that when your legs fall off." she added jokingly.

Jean leaned against his cane, heavily, his body still not accustomed to walking this way. "My legs won't fall off. Just as your child won't disappear." Jean said as a matter of fact. "If the impact was that severe, Armin would have said something."

Historia kept her child close to her chest. "I don't trust Armin to give us the whole picture." she whispered. "He never said anything directly and completely once in the entire time I've known him."

Mikasa stepped in. "He's had his reasons. We just have to trust him and Eren's words. It'll be ok."

After an awkward moment of silence, Jean looked from Ymir to Historia and nodded. "I'll let Hange know you're well." he said, then his eyes met hers.

"Does Hange really think putting you to work like that is moral?" Ymir asked, eyes narrowed. "I don't think the doctor would prescribe you to walk around like that."

Jean scuffed. "Since when do you worry about me?"

"I don't. I just wonder how far the military has fallen..."

Jean's cane clicked on the ground as he turned around to walk away.

Mikasa doesn't remember the exact details of that day. The rest of the evening was spent in a dull mood, having nothing to do but nothing to wait and see the effects of the power of the titans has on this small family.

The third day of fall would later be dubbed as the "great vanishing", However, right at that moment, Mikasa received a summoning to the telephone center of the palace that was more interesting than the events of that day.

"Yes?" she asked, putting the giant phone against her ear.

"Mikasa, It's Jean. Eren and Armin just stepped off a boat. They're in Paradise." Jean said, from the other side. "I just got the word"

"What!?" She mumbled, heart filling with sudden joy. "Really?"

"Yeah, the guards just reported a suspicious case that-- well-- is them. I'm certain of it."

"Where?"

"They're on the coastline. Come here tonight and we'll find them together."

"Got it. Just tell me where you are, Jean."

"Im at--"

A sudden loud voice cracked on their line. Mikasa took the earpiece off of her ear. She narrowed her eyes. "Jean?" she asked.

Jean didn't answer.

"Jean, are you there?"

"Mikasa..."

"What?"

"The pure titans." Jean whispered. His voice barely made it to her side of the phone. "They're smoking..."

The alarms sang from the other side of the phone. The line was cut right after a loud chorus of sounds assaulted her ears from the phone.

So Jean was with the pure titans. That explained where he was but what happened? If the pure titans were smoking, then they were either dying or--

Her eyes widened immediately. She dropped the telephone and ran out of the center at top speed.

She barged inside Historias room and was met with Ymir standing in the pile of smoke, looking at her own smoking hands and watching it rise from her body. The baby screamed and Historia held her tightly. "Ymir..." she mumbled, inching closer to her.

Ymir looked at the back of her hand. "What the hell is this..." she mumbled. Then her eyes widened in realization. "The jaw titan... Is it

gone?"

Mikasa pressed her mouth to a thin line. "Armin's warning..." she whispered. "It must have happened."

"Wait!" Historia's eyes shone with hope. "If the titan is gone and you're still here-- does that mean the curse of Ymir isn't working anymore?"

Mikasa took a step closer. All the protocols Hange had put in place ran in her mind. "Alright, do you feel any pain? Chest pains? Difficulty breathing? Trouble standing up?"

"Obviously not!" she said. She pointed at her body and smiled. "I... Actually I feel kinda better than I expected." she suddenly coughed, pushing the steam out of her lungs. "Damn..." she mumbled. "I have a feeling that's a lasting side effect..."

"Check your spine..." Mikasa said. "Hange's orders"

Ymir waved dismissively. "Alright, Alright." She slowly pulled off her shirt and turned around. "Well?" she asked.

Mikasa nodded, there were faded black marks around her spinal cord, it made the adjacent ribs visible as well. So, it's a side effect of the jaw titan leaving her. "I'll report this to Hange... Meanwhile, is it ok if a doctor comes and checks this out?"

Ymir sighed loudly, Historia said yes for her.

By the time she met up with Jean, the sky was getting dark, but not dark enough that the street lights were turned on.

Jean showed her where the last eyewitnesses saw them. He told them about the Hizuran passports and what caused the guards to suspect that "Armin Arlert" and "Eren Yeager" from Hizuru were actually their friends. The MP was also notified of this.

Jean had trouble walking as fast as she could, and he was afraid he wouldn't be able to walk comfortably on sand soils with his cane. So instead, Mikasa waited until the military police arrived and used one of their carriages as a means of transportation.

"Are you sure about this?" Jean asked reluctantly. "It would have been much faster if you--"

"I am." she nodded. She opened the door of the carriage and sat inside. She said something simple and disinterested in the MP officer inside and offered a hand for Jean. With a loud sigh, Jean took it. He took the small steps one at a time. Eventually, he sat inside and leaned the cane on the chair and Mikasa closed the door.

The MP officer, a woman a few years older than then, shouted at the carriage to start moving. She turned to Mikasa and Jean, who were sitting in front of her. "And where are we going?" she asked.

"Follow the coastline. I'm sure both of them are at the beach somewhere." Mikasa explained.

"You realize this is an extremely vague description."

"You've seen their photos plastered on the newspaper a hundred times by now. Didn't any of your soldiers see them?" Mikasa pushed the covers away and stared at the orange sky above the ocean blues. "I'll be on the lookout too."

The process was slow paced. One that allowed the MP to finally ask the question she clearly could not keep to herself. "So..." the MP officer murmured, she stared at the cane between Jean and Mikasa. "Did you... Lose that foot the battle with the Marleyans?" she asked.

Jean nodded, emotionlessly.

"Do you mind me asking... Didn't Eren Yeager heal everyone who was injured during that battle?" she asked.

"He did."

"Then how come..." she trailed off, arching an eyebrow.

Jean decided to humor her. "He healed a great deal of my injuries. My legs were... Amputated, actually. He healed them back but I can't control them as well as before... Not yet." he explained.

"In that case... I wish you a speedy recovery." she said politely.

As their conversation faded, Mikasa slowly noticed an approaching dot in the background. The closer they got the more details Mikasa could see from it. There were two people. One with blond hair and the other--

"Its them!" she screamed before the image clearly manifested. She jumped out of the carriage before it stopped and started running, a smile spreading from ear to ear.

With every step she took, her vision became clearer. At first, she could ignore the grueling amount of blood, but the horror of the scene became clearer and clearer. Until she couldn't ignore the blood, or the warnings in her head, anymore.

Eren was pale, deathly pale. Mikasa covered her gasp when she noticed his still chest. Armin clung to Eren's body, slowly rocking both of them back and forth. Water was rising and had already soaked some of their clothes. Blood soaks Armin's hands and the front of his chest.

Mikasa's first reflex is to pull Eren out of Armin's hands to start CPR. She laid him down on the ground and hit his face a few times. "Eren! Eren!" she screamed. She ignored the blood stain in the front of his chest and the lack of his body's reactions. "HOSPITAL! We need to get him to a hospital!!" she shouts at Jean, who was frozen in place a few feet away.

She put her hand over the blood stain and started CPR. She heard a few cracks under the force of her hands but ignored it. She did it again, and again, to see no reaction from Eren's body.

She kept going until she felt a weight on her shoulder, and then she realized the blood stains on her hand were too old to be from a fresh wound. "Mikasa..." Jean said, squeezing her shoulder. "He's gone."

She takes a sharp breath. After a moment, She puts her hands over Eren's face and realizes his skin is cold, too cold. He must have been gone for a long time. "Eren--" she choked on her own words. "What-- What happened here?"

The only person who knew was Armin, and Armin stared at nowhere.

"Let's arrest him."

Mikasa froze.

"This is obviously a crime scene." the MP officer said. "Look at him, look at the cut on Yeagers chest, and the blood on Arlert."

Mikasa didn't register what she meant. She had never seen Armin so broken. Armin's haunted eyes stared without seeing and refused to focus even when Mikasa sat down. His fingers twitched and he hugged himself. His meaningless mumbles refused to cease.

"this is not a crime scene." Jean said, loudly so that the MP officer would stop it. "Call your superiors and the castle. They would have to tend to this. "

Because Eren is dead. Really *gone* . It's not a trick of an eye and he's a titan, or he's followed Armin into the middle of nowhere. This time, Mikasa has a corpse, this time Eren's cold body is underneath her hands and Armin is sobbing over it, covered in his blood in a state of panic.

"Armin!" Mikasa snapped. She shook his shoulders to get his attention, to get him to respond but Armin's eyes stayed like dolls. "Armin, tell me what happened?"

Her own bubbling feelings were growing more and more, crushing her heart and expanding in her chest until she could feel the inevitable feeling of nothingness creep closer and closer.

She grabbed his face, holding it with both of her hands. "Armin!" She repeated his name until he responded. His eyes finally, *finally*, focus on her face. she was yelling and Armin had to answer. "WHAT HAPPENED HERE!"

Armin's blue eyes shook with unshed tears and he shut them. "It was..." he gulped. "It was supposed to be me."

Mikasa didn't understand. Armin curled onto himself and over Eren's body, burying his face into Eren's.

"Armin, Armin, look at me." She said again when she saw him zoning out. "I need you to take a deep breath. Who did this to you!? Who did this to--"

Armin's eyes open, really open, and Mikasa could see thought behind them for the first time that night. "I killed him. It was my fault." he said, loud and clear.

The little whispers ceased immediately. Every soldier present was shocked into silence and so was Mikasa.

"You... You don't mean that." Mikasa murmured. "Armin-- no, Don't lose focus!"

She shook his body, screamed in his face and tried to get him to respond but Armin didn't react to any of them. His body began to tremble. With no care in the world, he laid down next to Eren and his handsome refused to let go of Eren's body.

Mikasa felt Jean's hand on his shoulder. "Armin's in shock." he told her. "We need to sedate him."

Mikasa gritted her teeth. "Just look at him! How can you say that!"

Jean looked down. "If we don't get a hold of this, the MP will. They'll be much less kind to him than we are." he said as a matter of fact.

Mikasa runs her hands through her face. She sighs because she knows he's right. When Armin wakes up, they'd talk to him again.

It was shocking. There is no reality where Armin is responsible for Eren's death.

None.

They put Armin in his room in the castle. Dina orders his house arrest the moment she hears what had happened. She heavily believed Armin was a witness in shock, so she sent her own palace guards to investigate a possible murderer. The act was done publicly, mainly to scare the murderer into a confession. However, soon evidence rolled in and it became more and more apparent that Armin and Eren had been alone in that abandoned beach at the time of Eren's death.

Mikasa stood on her belief of Armin being innocent. She knew very little about who Eren's murderer might be, but she was certain it wasn't Armin Arlert.

And her trust in Armin only strengthened when Carla was told the news of Eren's death.

But Mikasa's certainty isn't enough. Eventually, someone is going to ask questions. Eren is an important person and the circumstances of his death can't be ignored.

Those were Hange's exact words. And Mikasa can't argue with her reasoning.

She kept a close eye on the MP investigating the crime scene. All of them kept talking about Armin like a criminal, a two faced person that finally showed the darker side of his constant schemes. Neither of them remembers how Armin's plans are the reason why most of them are alive right now.

And each insult poured more salt into Mikasa's open wound.

So she finds herself here, in front of Armin's locked room and two guards stationed on it. She stares at them, not saying anything that inclines her to visit.

The guards exchange a look. The braver one asks. "Uh, private Ackerman. We're ordered not to allow any visitors."

Mikasa glares at him angrily, but she doesn't say anything. The heavy silence continues until a "click click" sound echoes in the empty hallways. It takes a long time for Mikasa to remember it was Jean's cane.

He stands behind her and pulls at a sheet of paper. "We have permission from Commander Hange themselves." he says. He gives it to the guard and after a thorough look, he opens the doors.

Armin is sitting in the center of a circle of journals and notebooks. He's frantically reading through page after page and mumbling endlessly to himself. He doesn't react to their presence.

Mikasa walks over to him, holding her hands up. "Armin, how are you?" she asks, as slowly as she can.

Armin raises his head. He gives her a small smile and shakes his head. "Thanks for asking, Mikasa, but I'm not good at all."

To her surprise, Armin doesn't act as detached as she expected him to. "Oh... It's good to know you're... Talking." she says. "So, are you ready to talk about... About Eren?"

Armin chuckles. "You mean his death? You don't need to walk on eggshells around me." he whispers. His hand flips a page. "If it makes you feel any better... I don't know exactly what I did either."

Mikasa takes a deep breath. "It's ok. Let's start from the beginning. What happened when you came back to Paradise."

Armin shakes his head. "I'm sorry, Mikasa. I don't want to talk about it until I've figured it out myself."

She blinks in surprise. "What?"

His attention goes back to the journals. "Something happened back there. I was supposed to die back there, on the 3rd day of fall. Not Eren--" he says. Mikasa interrupts him.

"What do you mean? Armin, you're not making any sense"

"-- there must have been clues I missed. Something-- something to tell me what I've done. Did I anger founder Ymir at some point? Did I not uphold my end of the deal!? Why is she torturing me like this."

Even Jean stares at Armin, with bewilderment and shock. Armin would never talk like a religious wall-Cult driven insane.

"I've been reading my diaries ever since I was locked up here." Armin mumbles. "I haven't found anything yet.. Anything to say I disobeyed Ymir--"

Her patience quickly slips, she grabs Armin's wrists to stop him from taking another journal from the pile in front of them. "Look. At. Me." she demands, her hold on Armin's wrist becomes painfully tight. "You didn't find anything when you first read over your diaries and you won't find anything new now."

Armin looks at the ground, his bang covers his eyes and his hand starts to shake in Mikasa's hold. "There has to be something-- some sort of clue that I've missed..."

"What?"

"Anything..." Armin swallows the lump in his throat. "I must have missed something... Something crucial."

"Armin, maybe if you give me a clue, I'll help you find it." Mikasa whispers. "And... The MP is... The police are putting you at the top of their suspect list." She puts a firm hand on his shoulder. "If you don't do anything-- you'll be accused of Eren's murder."

That made Armin still.

He closed his book and put it aside. He sighed, accepting defeat. "I told you." he says. "My actions killed Eren. Plain and simple. It's ok if others find this out. I just need to know how?" he rises to his feet and walks over the pile of old journals on the ground. He walked over to his library. "How was I so stupid? There must have been clues and I must have had ways to stop it!"

He grips his hair, long golden locks in between his fingers. He yanks them out with a silenced cry.

Jean inches closer to her. "Mikasa... This is very serious.... He... I don't think Armin wants to defend himself." Jean shakes his head. "If he goes like that, Someone will eventually press charges."

Armin picked up another notebook and started skim reading it, completely ignoring the two of them.

Mikasa fisted her hands on her sides. "Who will? His legal family is just me and Carla. And neither of us believe this bullshit that Armin's the murderer."

Jean clears his throat. "... Queen Dina can."

Mikasa narrows her eyes dangerously. "She won't. She can't."

However, they could. Mikasa knew very well it was to their luck that paradise's legal system didn't have an attorney to press charges without someone actually asking for it. As long as no one truly steps up and accuses Armin of Eren's murder--

But if someone does.

Someone has to defend Armin when he himself won't.

A few days later, Mikasa got an urgent message from Jean while helping Carla with arranging the funeral. The messenger told him the report of Eren's autopsy is finally here and currently in Jean's hands as a trusted deputy for Hange Zoe.

Mikasa rushes out and gets to the scouts headquarters as fast as she can. She finds Jean in Hange's room with them. Hange gives her a small greeting and points at the chair in front of their desk to sit down, next to Jean.

"I came as fast as I could." she says. "What does the autopsy say?"

Hange clears his throat. "It raised more questions than answers."

Mikasa looks at Jean from the corner of her eyes, he slowly shakes his head. Her hands ball into tight fists. "Any luck?" she asks reluctantly.

Hange slides the folder over to Mikasa. "Even the specialists had a dispute over the cause of Eren's death. Some suspected a cardiac arrest... There is a clause that I think you should read for yourself." they say.

Jean rests his hands on top of his cane. He doesn't meet her eyes while she reads the report. The paper folds in her hand and she throws it away angrily when she finishes. "This is ridiculous. Armin

would never do that! Why would he-- why would anyone carve open Eren's heart?" she stutters as she fails to repeat what was written on the page.

"I know, I know. But that's the official cause of Eren's death now." Jean says. "In the eyes of the law and the detectives in the scouts..." he looks away. "They believe Armin tore his heart out. That's because they couldn't find Eren's heart anywhere. It can't disappear into thin air. That's the only logical explanation they could find."

Hange pushes their glasses upwards and hums. "Or maybe... Or maybe his heart disappeared just like any dismembered body part of a titan does." they wonder out loud. "... But... I doubt any one in the court will believe that theory."

Jean nods. "The autopsy report looks convincing, it backs up the claim of Armin being the murderer," he admits.

Mikasa stood up, it sent her chair flying back. "What do you mean by all this? Who's side are you on!?"

Jean's hand trembles over his cane. "There aren't any sides here, not really." he takes a deep breath. "The only person that can shine some light on the situation is Armin, who... Well... Refuses to elaborate any further."

"Well, He has to." Hange says as a matter of fact. "Mikasa, how is Eren's funeral planning going?"

Mikasa blinks in surprise. "I... Carla is planning it in a remote area of shiganshina. I suggested he should be buried in a meadow near our old house. Under a tree he liked." she explains.

Hange rubs their chin. "I will convince the queen to let Armin out. Maybe if he gets to say goodbye to Eren, we'll finally be able to knock some sense into him."

Hange looks at both of them. "For now, the results of this autopsy are confidential. Not even Armin gets to know, Understand?"

Mikasa takes a deep breath to calm herself down. "I understand."

he needs this.

Mikasa keeps reminding herself as the guards pull a handcuffed Armin in the halls of the castle and to the carriage. Armin doesn't say a word during the entire ride to Shiganshina, and not a word when they go to the funeral home.

They lead them underground where it's cold and hard to touch. That's the place where the guards leave her and Armin alone with Eren's corpse in a casket.

Armin doesn't raise his head.

Mikasa walks over to the casket and opens it, she shuts her eyes immediately, not bearing to look at Eren's dead skin.

If she has the choice, she much rather prefers her last memory of Eren to be the one they shared on the watchtowers that day, not whatever this is.

So, She steps back.

(She has enough on her mind. She is the one who has to talk for Eren today, say what life he lived and--)

"He deserves this." Mikasa mumbles to herself, "Hange's right. Maybe... Maybe a proper goodbye is what he needs." her notes fold in her hand. "Hopefully, this'll make him see some sense."

Armin raises his head then, he walks over to the coffin and stares at it for longer than Mikasa would like to admit. He covers the lower half

of his face with his bound hands and bites back a sob that shakes his entire body.

Mikasa watches from afar.

He quickly gathers himself and takes a deep breath. Slowly he lowers his face until he is whispering right into Eren's unhearing ears. "I'll be right behind you." Armin whispers in his ears. "See you soon, Eren."

Unbeknownst to Mikasa and Jean, Historia and Ymir are entering the chapel at the same time the guards are taking Armin away.

Historia is frozen in place when she sees the easy and careless smile on him, one she associates with a madman. He doesn't recognise them, too lost in the world in his head to do so.

But Historia does. she only wanted to be here to pay her respect. The sight of him freezes her on the spot and makes her hide her daughter. The smile on his face reminded her of that night in Utgard castle, the night he had no problem with sending either Historia or Ymir to their deaths.

It's Ymir who breaks the silence. "What the hell is wrong with him?" she asks. "Did he..."

"Yes..." Historia whispers back. "He probably saw Eren."

"His face didn't look like someone who just lost a loved one." Ymir whispers back. "They should check him up with a doctor. I think he's still suffering from the aftermaths of the Marleyans torture."

"Maybe." Historia whispers back, confused.

The funeral itself isn't too long or too crowded.

Carla keeps it like Eren liked. Small and with only friends and family present. Dina too, without her lengthy court and endless nobles by her side.

Infact, the Queen of paradise sits there silently. Her eyes are covered by the black veil of her hat and Mikasa hasn't seen her talk to anyone.

It's tradition to "say goodbye" to the deceased before burying them. Mikasa is the only one who doesn't stand up and go to the coffin. Even Jean goes, and Connie. All say goodbye while she stays back.

The ceremony passes like a blur, and the dreaded public talk she has to give to everyone present comes way too fast. One moment the casket is lowered to the ground under that tree and the next, the people are staring at her.

Even Dina.

Mikasa takes a deep breath. She can do it. It's simple. She prepared this speech once. She narrows her eyes.

"Mikasa." Carla's soft voice pulls her back to reality. She looks back and meets her eyes. "It's... Time for your speech."

Mikasa opens her mouth to say something, but words fail her. She crosses her arms over her chest, and slowly shakes her head.

Carla smiles knowingly. Before Mikasa can react, Carla removes her headscarf. She nods at the funeral director and walks on the makeshift stage, allowing Mikasa to stay behind.

Silence hits the small audience when instead of Mikasa, It's Carla who says a few words.

She smiles at the crowd, a small knowing smile. One that hides endless sorrows.

In the crowd, Dina stares at Mikasa from the corner of her eyes. All the others' eyes are on Carla. "When Eren was around 8, he came home one day very troubled and asked about the outside world. Back then, All I knew was the legends about the world beyond the walls, so I told him exactly that. And I added that he shouldn't think about going there." Carla clears her throat, the tension on her shoulder slowly easing down. "Eren, being the rebellious free spirit person he was, didn't listen."

There was a pause when Carla stopped to voice her thoughts, and guilt ate Mikasa alive.

"At the time, there was a lot I didn't know about. The world beyond the walls, what Grisha was up to, or how the future would turn out. However there was one thing I was sure of and that was Eren had a fighting spirit unlike every other child I'd seen. When most of the kids would run away from a fight, Eren would run into it. Didn't matter what the fight was even about or who his enemies were... I was horrified to learn that quality would actually help him in the military."

"After the walls fell, I caught Eren staring at the wall of Trost from within the refugee center of Shiganshina. It was hard to explain, a glint of wonder and want. In that moment I realized there was no stopping him. There was something beyond that wall that he wanted. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep him from joining the military. I knew that would spell the end of him. This is the *third* time his death was announced to me actually." She added the last part after a fake cough. "But him joining the military gave him the chance and contributed to a series of events that I know Eren wouldn't change if he went back in time..."

"When Eren was born I... I realized my child was special, just for the reason that he was born. And it was cruel to condemn a special child to a life of boredom." She says more confidently. "As unjust as his words were... He once called this kind of life a life of *cattle* . He chose to live a life of fighting for freedom and adventure, even though that meant leaving us behind in the dust."

Mikasa took a deep breath and looked away. Slowly, and hesitantly, Jean put a hand on his shoulder.

"Many of you remember Eren as the attack titan. Or a scout, or the Prince." Carla takes a deep breath. "He grew and grew and but he liked the fight for growth more than he did those titles. So instead I'd give him the title of a brother in arms, a soldier, and a son."

"You will be remembered, my son." She says as a soft smile rises to her lips. "I know even in the afterlife you will find something to fight for, somewhere to grow, something to find. So I won't tell you to rest in peace, but I wish to see you again in the form of the wonders this world has to offer. I will think of you. Always. I'll see you in the freedom of birds in the sky, the force of the wind, the strength of mountains, and the mysteries you loved to explore."

Carla takes a step back from the podium, her words are followed by a meaningful silence from the crowd.

With a heavy heart, Historia accepts Dina's offer to talk to Armin.

She doesn't want to but understands she has to try. Maybe a new face will make Armin say something, preferably someone that was close to Eren. No one had the heart to ask this from Carla so here she is.

She nods at the guards to open the door and they do exactly as they are ordered.

Inside the room is a mess. Papers fly all around and open books are scattered on every surface and the library is empty. Armin himself doesn't look much better, his hair is an unwashed mess and dark circles under his eyes have grown since she saw him at the funeral.

He raises his tilted his head when she enters, his face remains completely neutral.

She clears her throat, and makes sure not to step on paper as she walks in. "I'll ask this just once." Historia says, She takes one step closer to the mess of papers Armin was reading at the center. "What did you do to Eren?"

"I killed him." he says simply, frustration leaks from his tone. "Why is it so hard for you people to understand?"

"Armin." Historia repeats. He forces herself to take a deep breath to calm down. It was Dina's idea, play the part of the good cop and Armin might just confess what happened if he felt safe enough. So she brings forth the kindness she didn't know she was capable of and tries again: "You can trust me, Armin. Tell me what happened. I can help you."

Instead, Armin rolls his eyes. "You're going to do what you want, there is no point in arguing with you." he whispers, and he shuts the book.

Historia stares at his back, stunned at the stone cold reaction she's receiving. Something in the back of her mind cracked. "You..." she whispers, "you won't say anything, will you?"

"I've been saying it for however long I've been here!" Armin yells. "My. Actions. Killed. Eren! I just need to know how."

"You make no sense. And you know what?!?" she shouted. "I think you really did kill Eren. Why else would you *smile* when coming out of his funeral!! I'm done! You won't say anything to make this any better!"

She walks over to Armin and grabs his collar as hard as she could. "No, of course, you won't! You love this!" Historia shouts. "You've always loved this! You loved keeping everything so diluted, so *vague*, so you could do whatever the hell you want. It's easy to manipulate things when no one knows what's really happening, huh? You manipulative bastard!"

Her patience slips away. She threw him back and his back hit his table. He keeps his head down. "And I'm done playing right into your games." she growls, and points a threatening finger at him. "Either you tell me what the hell happened with Eren, or I'll make sure you're hanged as his killer. Am I clear?"

Slowly, Armin raises his head. The joy she sees in his eyes disgusts her But it quickly fades away into nothingness. "Crystal." he murmurs. Armin tilts his head, his eyes empty. "As I said..." he says and rises to his feet completely. "You're going to do what you want, there is no point on arguing with you."

Historia turns away, stomping her feet as she walks away from him.

"Historia--" he says.

she doesn't stop for him. The doors close behind her and are locked shut.

Armin leans against a wall and slowly slides down until he's sitting down. A strong sense of relief washes over him and he rests his head on his knees, hugging himself. A smile spreads on his lips and he whispers: "-- Thank you."

"I want you two to have a separate investigation about Armin. Specifically to prove him innocent." Hange orders the two of them. "If you need to hide anything, you can hide it in my office and I'll give you written permission about I'm permitted to give you."

She quickly signed a paper and gave it to Mikasa and Jean, who were standing in front of her. "Any ideas where to start?" she asks them.

"... Creating a timeline of events will help." Jean offers.

"Great! Start there." Hange stands up and fixes their medallion. "I'm busy as a bee these days, and with the anniversary of Marley's

attack approaching, I'll just get more busy. I'll leave this task entirely up to you two."

Hange clears her throat. "I want weekly updates." they say and turn around. They leave the meeting room with Mikasa and Jean in complete silence.

A moment later, Jean slowly sits down on a chair to relieve the pain shooting from his regenerated knee. "That's going to be hard..."

Mikasa crosses her arms over her chest. "It's for Armin." she says as a matter of fact. "It's better to get him out of suspicion as fast as we can."

"Alright, let's talk about Armin's last moment in paradise then onwards." Jean rubs his chin. "We don't know where he went, but obviously there aren't a lot of safe routes in and out of paradise."

Mikasa crosses her arms over her chest. "Eren asked for Hizuran passports about nine months ago. So at that point, Armin was in Hizuru." She mumbles. "We can track their passports."

"And it's with the MP."

"We can take them back. Technically they're Hizuru's property."

Jean stops. A thought passes from his eyes and he says it out loud. "Mikasa, How are Eren and Armin in Hizuru?" he asks.

Mikasa has to think for a moment. "I don't know. Why is that important."

"Armin was MIA." Jean wonders. "How did Eren know when and where he was exactly? He couldn't track him with the power of the titan when Armin was being tortured by Marley. So how...?"

Mikasa hums quietly. "I think... I think he said he got a call last time I talked to him."

"A call? From whom?"

"I don't know." she says. "But I genuinely think it's a good place to start." quickly Mikasa puts on her coat and buttons it up. "Easy. We'll just have to run to the MPs, grab their passports. Then we have to go to the call center and pull a few strings using the permission Hange gave us. Maybe later we'll have to--"

Jean slowly stands up. He clears his throat. "You should go," he adds. "I'll stay in the headquarters and ask around about whatever we know about the power of the titans vanishing. Maybe it's related."

"Why? There's more chance we can find out more from--" she looks down at Jean's cane. "Oh..."

Jean bites his lower lip. "Yeah... I can't really run around yet. I'm sorry."

"It's-- It's actually a good idea." Mikasa says instead. "I'll be back soon. Maybe you're right and the power of the titans really is related to Eren."

"Alright, Now we have a timeline of events." Jean whispers. "Neither of the places they went to were warzones. So technically that means Eren *didn't* get a life threatening injury that killed him after his titan died."

"It can happen..." Mikasa mumbles. "Here, they're Anti-Eldian right? Maybe they were found out."

"They left the country legally. So it's unlikely they were caught."

Mikasa hums. "So... What about before that? Before Armin and Eren met?"

"We might now know what Armin was up to. But we know a few things about Eren's whereabouts before he left paradise." Jean

whispers. "We can start from there."

Mikasa hums thoughtfully. "... I think I know where to start."

"The last time I saw Eren was during our secret wedding." Historia says as a matter of fact. There is an untouched cup of tea in front of all three of them.

"And that was the last time you saw him?" Mikasa asks, once again to be sure.

Historia leans back further into her chair, her head rests on her fists and the calculating look in her eyes speaks volumes. "Yes." she grits her teeth. "Last time we talked-- he didn't even mention anything about traveling the world with Armin."

Historia looks around, her eyes settle on the window of her room. Her eyes get lost in the undisturbed view.

The room she shared with Ymir was on a higher floor than the ones she previously had, it was right next to Dina's, thus it's bigger and has a higher level of security.

Historia doesn't like being interrogated. Mikasa can see it from the way her free hand taps against the handle of her chair and her eyebrows are twisted in a frown. She looks at Jean from the corner of her eyes, signaling his turn to talk.

Jean clears his throat. "What did he say then?" he asks. "Did he ever mention any plans for after the power of the titans disappear?"

She clicks her tongue, and Mikasa notices it's a mannerism she's most likely taken from Eren from the time they spend as Prince and Crown princess of the nation. "Not really. He first expressed his disapproval about me and Ymir's baby. Then changed his mind after realized it's none of his business." she hums. "I think... Yeah, that's

the last time we had all that much of a conversation." she waves dismissively. "Other than the letters, of course."

Mikasa nods. "Thank you for talking to us anyway."

"My pleasure." She says. "Now can I ask a question, Mikasa?"

It catches her off guard, but she doesn't show it on her face. Mikasa nods, simply and emotionlessly.

Historia hums. "When are you going to admit that Armin is the killer?"

Mikasa doesn't miss a beat. "Never, because he's not." she says as a matter of fact.

Historia's face doesn't express more emotion. "I admire your resolve." she says as a matter of fact. "Be honest with me, do you really think Armin had some sort of ulterior motive for ripping Eren's chest apart and taking his heart?"

Mikasa blinks in surprise. She stands up and narrows her eyes dangerously at Historia, noticing the change in atmosphere.

Historia barks a laugh. "Doesn't Armin *always* have an ulterior motive?" she says. "This is Armin, Mikasa, and I'm tired of wondering what his next plan will be. Can't you? He succumbed into madness. No. He had gone mad the moment he stopped me and Eren's plans and doomed 5 thousand of our people and the entire southern region that was destroyed in Marley's attack."

Historia stands up, venom pours out of her eyes. "Let's be honest, from an outsider's perspective Armin's actions became crazier and crazier, but people just went along with it. This is a turning point. I don't want to spend the rest of my political life thinking what else is that master manipulator planning. Consequences of what he's done is far too much this time."

"What are you going with?"

Historia sighs loudly. "Mikasa, I won't beat around the bush. First thing tomorrow, I'm pressing charges." She says as a matter of fact. "If Armin is hell-bent on staying silent, then he might talk in court."

Mikasa's eyes widened. "You can't! You have no right over him!" she shouts.

Historia stands up too, slowly and elegantly. "Yes I do. We were both part of the same royal family, were we not?"

Jean tries to push her back but Mikasa shrugs his hand off. "You can't!!"

"Yes I can, Now if you'll excuse me, I have a newborn to tend to and a wife to help." Historia reminds them. Her guards appear in front of them. Jean has to put a hand on her shoulder to stop her from attacking them.

The guards escort them out. Historia doesn't spare another glance at the doors until they close in Mikasa's face.

She shrugs off Jean's hand and marches over to the door. Her hand freezes moments before banging on Historia's door and demanding more answers.

She steps back with an angry growl. "This is ridiculous! What right does she have over Eren?" She throws her hands in the air. "She has no right, No right!"

Jean puts both of his hands over his cane as he leans into it, something she notices is becoming a habit the more he gains strength on his leg and doesn't need the cane for strict balance.

"We'll find a way. It's not something Hange didn't predict." He assures her. "Armin is innocent, and we will prove it."

"It's different to prove it in a court!" she yells.

"Maybe this way, Armin is more willing to cooperate." Jean offers.

Mikasa rolls her eyes. She mumbles a string of curses and walks away, leaving Jean wondering about her destination.

The next time Mikasa visits Armin, she thinks a bomb was detonated in his room and in his face.

She has to take a step back and feel sorry for him. His hair looks greasy and tangled, and his eyes look haunted. He smiles when their eyes meet.

"Hello Mikasa." he says happily. "I was hoping you would come before Historia ordered my execution." he tilts his head. "Wait a minute... Didn't you die?"

Mikasa blinks in surprise. She points at her own chest and asks. "Me?"

Armin slaps himself. "Sorry. Wrong timeline." he mumbles. "It's getting really confusing these days." he rubs his temples. "And not getting sleep is definitely not helping me!"

Mikasa takes a deep breath and exhales loudly. "Why..." she asks slowly. "Why can't you sleep?"

"I have to find out what I did wrong that Eren died, of course." Armin rolls his eyes. "Historia will execute me soon, I just have to treasure the time I have left to find out what it all was about."

"Armin..." she asks. "Armin, did you know Historia officially pressed charges."

"Pressed charges?" he scoffs. "She doesn't need that! She's the queen. She can do what she wants."

Horror and confusion grips her heart in cold hands. She took a step closer to Armin, her hands held up in a non threatening way.

"Armin." she says carefully. "Historia isn't the queen. Dina is. Remember?"

Armin blinks in surprise. "Dina..." he mumbles. "Ah yeah, Dina! You're right!"

"Ok. Armin, Do you understand what this means?"

Armin yawns loudly. He rubs his sore eyes and nods. "Where's Eren, by the way?" he asks. "Can you tell him to stop with the mind games?" he chuckles. "I'm trying to focus here."

Mikasa takes a sharp breath. "Armin... How long have you... When was the last time you slept?"

Armin blinks in surprise. "Hm. Slept? Maybe when they locked me in this room. I gotta say, this is much better than that dungeon I was locked up in." he rolls his eyes. "Please tell Eren and Historia this won't change my mind. I will never support the rumbling. Tell Eren this is all pointless."

Mikasa bites her lip. Her hopes for Armin recovering all fall down in that instance. "Armin. Do you know why you're locked up here? Do you know where Eren is?"

Armin chuckles. He hugs his book tightly. "Of course I know! I... I..." the smile falls from his lips. "I'm... Here for... What am I here for? The rumbling or... Or Eren's murder?"

He looks away and wipes his eyes with the palms of his hand. "What-- what am I here for-- is-- is it-- it's for the rumbling isn't it?" he turns to Mikasa with pleading eyes. His voice grows weaker and weaker with every word. "Please. Please. I'm here for resisting the rumbling right?"

Although Mikasa understands nothing of what he says, she knows she must shake her head.

The book falls from Armin's weak hands and his knees shake. He falls to his hands and knees and his body starts to shake uncontrollably.

Mikasa kneels down next to him. She rubs his back. "It's ok... Armin..." She tries to soothe him but he covers the bottom half of his face and bites his hand.

"You can't change it." Armin murmurs, his own eyes widening.

Mikasa's hand stops. "What do you mean?" she whispers.

"My death is an unchanging fixation. You can't change it. Like Marco's. My grandpa's. It can't be changed." Armin wonders outloud. "Besides... Am I supposed to be happy to have survived *like* this?"

Armin wets his dried lips. He can't stop it, once the first tear escapes, he starts sobbing in Mikasa's arms.

Jean opens the door and tries to run inside but instead it's an awkward fast walk. "Mikasa- " he says, loudly. "There is a marleyan prisoner who's being released today." Jean says and gives her the papers. "And guess who had bailed him out?"

Mikasa stares at Eren's signature on the bottom of the paper. "Why would Eren bail an Eldian of Marley-- of all people?"

"I don't know." Jean says. "But it's not a coincidence that his brother happens to be one of the kids Historia took under her wing. That boy did something, maybe helped Eren in some way. We need to dig further into it. Maybe it'll give us a clue what Eren was up to."

"You're right." Mikasa nods. "Come in! He's going to be bailed out today."

"Go. I'll make sure we'll-- Ah, MIKASA!" Mikasa picks Jean up like he weighs nothing as she sprints outside. By the time they're in the

carriage, Jean has turned pale and halfway to their destination, they realize he had accidentally dropped his cane.

They reached the titans' prison right on time. The facility was originally supposed to hold the pure titans on the island. However, all of them had turned back into humans.

According to the newspapers, the civilians and patriots have been freed, but the Marleyan soldiers had stayed inside the prison with no exceptions.

Other than Colt Grice, apparently.

They reach there just in time to meet the family before Colt is freed. The guards lead them to a waiting room where the family of three are waiting for their first born.

Mikasa clears her throat. "Which one of you is Falco Grice?" she asks. "We need to talk to you."

The boy visibly tenses. He takes a step back, to put some distance between them. "That's me..." he whispers. "Can I help you?"

Mikasa had been expecting this, she's more surprised that the parents are not jumping to protect their child, but some habits from the Marleyan days are hard to break.

"It's ok, we don't mean any harm. Just have a few questions we were hoping you could answer." Jean says, holding up a hand.

"Did you talk to Eren?" Mikasa asks immediately. "Why did he let your brother go?"

The boy's face grows pale, and so do his parents. This time, the father steps in and pushes his son back. "We were told the prince's will was iron-tight. Is Colt being released today? If there is a problem, I assure you, we did NOT do anythi--"

"Please relax." Mikasa interrupted. "We just wanted to know why Eren would help you out? It's important information for another case."

Falco takes a deep breath. "I just... I told Eren Yeager where Mr Oswin-- I mean-- Mr Arlert was going. He told me he'll free my brother as a thank you." he says quickly.

Time froze in Mikasa's mind. "Arlert..." she repeated. "You knew where Armin was? Where was he?"

Falco swallows an anxious lump in his throat. "Mr Arlert was... He was hiding in Liberio as his old persona, Mr *Oswin*... He didn't want anyone to know but when he left Liberio... I called Eren Yeager and told him everything."

That explains it.

Mikasa fights back with a sense of relief. She kneels down to be eye level with Falco. This boy can tell them alot. "Hey, Falco, do you know Eren has died?"

Falco swallows hard. "Yeah... I'm sorry to hear that though." he mumbles.

"Yes. And do you know who is being charged for his murder?"

Falco tilts his head. "Who?"

Mikasa clears her throat. "Armin."

"Mr Armin!?! That's impossible!"

Jean smiles, with only half of his face. "That's what we wanted to hear. We need any information you have about Armin and what he was doing. If you give us that, we can prove he's innocent. Do you want to help us with that?"

Falco plays with the hem of his sleeves. Slowly, he nods.

Mikasa grins, she smiles for the first time since Eren's body was found on that beach.

A month passed, after back and forth investigation, a date for a court was set for exactly one month after Armin and Eren were found at the beach.

Mikasa wasn't satisfied with the evidence they had that would secure Armin's innocence, but it was enough to raise a few questions.

That afternoon, Mikasa found Jean in the graveyard. She was ashamed to admit she forgot about the anniversary of Marley's attack. The same attack that took Sasha from them. The same attack that took 5 thousand paradisian lives and leveled all three southern cities to the ground.

It didn't take long, she had to search only two spots. First Sashas, who had flowers and a steamed potato on the memorial, and she found Jean standing silently near Marcos memorial, deathly silent and empty handed.

Slowly, she walks next to him and pays silent respect to all their fallen comrades. She looks at Jean from the corner of her eyes and wonders if this is the first time he is visiting Marco's grave.

"I'm sorry. I just had to see them today." he says. "I hope the MP didn't give you a lot of trouble with giving in those evidence for the trial tomorrow."

"I volunteered to do it." She reminds him. "And... It's ok to be here. I wanted to visit Sasha too."

Jean chuckles. "I guess I just... Can't really believe it." he shakes his head. "I couldn't believe it back then too, and couldn't force myself to kill Marcos titan."

Mikasa hums.

Jean turns around. His hands shake over his cane. "Have I thanked you? For saving my life?" he asks. "I never thanked you enough. I don't know how to thank you enough."

"Yes, you have." she nods. "A few times now."

He shakes his head. "I guess..." he takes a deep breath. "Do you want to visit Eren today, too?"

Mikasa did, but the journey to Shiganshina will take days, and she has to be refreshed for Armin's court. "No..." she whispers. "I'll visit him later, when Armin is free."

Hesitantly, Jean puts a warm hand on her shoulder. "We did all we could," he tells her. "The odds are in our favor. Dina won't order Armin's execution."

Mikasa puts her hand over Jean's, and squeezes. She offers no words.

"So... You mean this will be gone forever?"

Dina spun around herself, showing the atmosphere of the Paths around her to the only present soul, Eren.

He nodded. "It will all be gone. Just as Armin said it." he said confidently.

"Let's just order founder Ymir to revoke whatever deal it is." Dina said with a shrug. "She won't be able to refuse."

Eren sighed. He slowly rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I wish I could tell you..."

Dina laughed. "Why can't you?" she challenged me. "There is no one here but us."

"She's here." Eren pointed out. "And I'm... I'm afraid of how she'll react if I tell anyone."

"... React?"

"Just believe me ok?" Eren demanded. "The power of the titans will disappear at the third day of fall. Ymir will be freed on that date."

Dina repeats that memory in her mind every moment she is left alone on her throne. She leans her head against her fist and stares into the eyes of the person in front of her while not listening to a word he says.

The last time she met Eren. That was right before he left for Hizuru and completely ignored her orders to return.

That was the memory she remembered.

However, she always knew that memory was fuzzy, it was cut too fast and she never remembers leaving the Paths afterwards.

In the third day of fall, in the same moments she stares at her hands in bitter shock as the female titan left her body forever, the formerly erased part of her memory returned.

And everything started to make sense.

"Just believe me ok?" Eren demanded. "The power of the titans will disappear at the third day of fall. Ymir will be freed on that date. And I will die" he emphasized on the last part.

Dina tilted her head, arching in eyebrows as if questioning everything about Eren's sanity.

"Believe it or not, it's the truth." he rolled his eyes.

"Alright then..." Dina crosses her arms over her chest, subtly biting back her laugh. "Alright... Alright... I'll take this seriously. What makes you say that?"

"I... I can't really tell you the details. I don't want Ymir to take advantage of it and not uphold her end of the deal..."

Dina's eyes widened as it all clicked. "You made a deal with FOUNDER YMIR!?" she shouted, all the calm slipped from her body. "Eren-- what was it?!"

"I can't tell you the details. You and I are always connected to the Paths... So she'll be able to hear whatever I tell you. But know this... My heart is the key to freeing founder Ymir from the Paths and the curse of the titans."

The more Eren spoke, the more his body in the paths turned to sand. So did Dina's, Her mind rapidly understood they were being kicked out of the paths. At the time, the shock made her freeze, no one could push the two of the paths other than themselves and yet...

Ymir's haunted eyes stared into her soul in the last moments Dina was in the paths for the last time.

When she felt herself in the physical world again, her memories of after that were wiped. She kept on smirking and smiling at Eren, not knowing what the other had just confessed.

Now, the look of knowing horror in Eren's eyes made sense.

Infact, too many details are starting to make sense. Dina's mind was bombarded with Information she couldn't quite process.

Time travel?

Bargains?

Or specifically--

Who bargained whose heart in this deal with Ymir. Sure Eren ultimately paid the price but what did Ymir truly want?

With the power of the titans gone, she will never know.

She hears a rattle behind the doors of her balcony and smiles. So her guest had gotten her message. She puts her tea away and turns to the darkest corner of her room. "You can come in. I know you made that sound to inform me you're here."

A moment later, the doors open and a cloaked man walks in, his ODM gear barely hidden behind his cloak.

Dina smiles. "I'm glad you got my message, Captain Levi." she says. the cup of tea cracks against the tea table as she lowers it down. "Though... I am surprised to see you here again after so long."

Levi takes off his hoodie to reveal his face. "You called me here." he says as a matter of fact. "Why else would your soldiers put random notes around random jungles on this island?"

"It hurts my pride in my intelligence community to admit locating you on our own was impossible." Dina grinds her teeth. "However I did have a vague feeling you'd come around yourself when you knew what I wanted of you."

Levi didn't react. "And what is that?"

"It is not much different from what I told you in my notes." Dina clears her throat. "Your dagger, or should I say Kenny Ackermans old dagger, was found near the crime scene. Not too near to make you a suspect... Unfortunately." she sighs. "But close enough to have dropped off from a *witness* ."

Levi doesn't react.

"I need to know what you saw." Dina says as a matter of fact.

"What makes you think I saw anything?"

Dina chuckles. "This is what I believe happened, Captain Levi." she says confidently. "Armin and Eren use Hizuru passports. Gossip spreads like wildfire." she waves her hand dismissively. "You hear it. And decide to check for yourself. It could have more reasons than one. You follow the coastline, maybe ask around for anyone who's seen anything and that lands you right in the crime scene of Eren's murder... Then for whatever reason, you leave before the MP truly searches around and find you."

"Believe what you want." Levi shot back emotionlessly. "Why don't you tell me what you really want from me?"

Dina leans back against her chair. "Tell me what you saw... And I might overlook whatever your involvement with Zeke's death was."

"I don't need your pardon." he scuffs. "Coming here was a waste of precious time."

"Captain Levi, Wait--"

But he doesn't. The next moment, the balcony doors are open and Levi has already jumped from them. Dina stands up to follow him but she's left in the dust. In defeat, she sits back down and rubs her temples.

A chuckle echoes in the room. "Told 'ya it won't work." Kenny laughs and steps into the light. "That boy is too freaking stubborn."

"Fine fine." Dina shakes her head. "Do your magic. Just bring me the results."

Kenny tips his fedora hat up. He smiles from ear to ear.

In a tiny village in Sina, there is a new tea shop which opens exactly at sunrise.

It is rumored that the owner was once in the military and that's why he works so early. Others speculate he's simply insomniac. Little do they know both are true.

It took little time for Kenny to put two and two together and find Levi in his very own peaceful teashop in this part of the country. He will give it to him, no one from the MP will ever think to look here even if they had valid reason to.

He walks in and claps his hands, loud enough that it echoes. "Bravo! Bravo!" he says. "You really did learn what I told you about stealth."

Levi walks out from behind the counter, a kettle in hand. He narrows his eyes dangerously in anger. "Kenny..." he growls.

"Levi! I'd say come give your old uncle a hug but... Ya know." he shrugs.

Levi puts his kettle down. "If you know where I live, why didn't you tell it to *her highness*?" He spits the queen's title. "What do you want, Kenny?"

Kenny tips his fedora hat up, he throws away his cigarette and crushes it under the heel of his foot. "I wanted to talk to you before you finalize your decision."

Levi arches an eyebrow.

"Fine fine. I just wanted to know how the brat died." he adds with a shrug. "I saw his power first hand more times than I can count. And I wonder how Uri's successor can die so pathetically. You'd want to know if anything happened to that commander of yours' legacy, wouldn't you?"

Levi arches an eyebrow.

"One sentence is enough for me. Although..." Kenny whispers. "Now you're making me wonder why you're not telling us."

"Why am I not?" Levi shakes his head. "You're looking for someone to blame and I can't tell you who it is. All I saw was that on moment the brats were hugging and the next, Eren dropped dead." Levi says simply. "Armin was the only one there, but he didn't have any weapons that could have caused his death."

"So... Did the blondie kill him or not?"

Levi narrows his eyes. "You tell me." he argues. "Armin had no weapons. They hug, Eren dies. It's impossible for him to be the killer and not to be the killer at the same time."

Kenny clears his throat. He spurts the words out before he thinks about them. "Are you sure you weren't high or drunk or something?"

"You got your answer." Levi growls. "... And I better never see an MP around here."

Kenny raises his hands in surrender. "Ah please! I'm not a snitch."

"No MPs."

"Fine, fine." Kenny puts his hands into his pockets. "Ya know, kid, I'm glad to see you in one piece... Although I never thought you'd let go of the thrill."

Levi doesn't answer. He returns to his kettles and watches them brew. After a few moments of dense silence, Kenny decides to walk away without any other word.

Dina takes a long sip of her tea. They seem to have lost their original ability to calm her down.

"... Were those his exact words?" she asks Kenny.

Kenny nods. "More or less, yeah." he nods. "Not exactly helpful, is it?"

Dina looks at the two files in front of her. The first one is the official MP claim that paints Armin as the murderer, supported by Historia. The other is everything Mikasa could find to show Armin had no plan of killing him, brought in by Mikasa.

Tomorrow is the trial, and the investigations have failed to make the murderer more clear. Infact, there is no other suspect other than Armin himself. This is more of a race to prove Armin's innocence rather than finding Eren's killer.

The folders in front of her are thick with reports and different testimonies Historia and Mikasa gathered to prove their point. Both look valid to her, as the queen, but she can't agree with them both at the same time.

Dina holds her pen with both of her hands, as tightly as she can. The pen makes a cracking sound.

After a moment, Dina makes up her mind. She turns to her personal assassin with unreadable eyes. "Kenny. I have a mission for you." she orders. "I will make sure no record of the trial will go public, and it will remain a governmental secret. However... If Armin is found guilty tomarow, I need you to make sure his death looks like a tragic suicide."

Kenny clicks his tongue. "Consider it done. But why?"

"What sort of image will I paint for the royal family if the prince's consort killed him?" she asks. The pen in her hand breaks into two. "If Armin has to die, Then I'll make sure he dies the least painful and least scandalous way possible."

She drops the broken pen. "Dismissed." she growls.

Kenny rolls his eyes. Then he leaves the throne room with a small careless tip of his head.

So how was it? Obviously, Erens death would have different reactions. So of course, Mikasa represents the people who think there's no way Armins the killer. Historia is the ones who think "well I haven't understood a thing about Armins actions since I met him and this time he's gone way too far." and both are valid POVs in my opinion.

Hopefully you've made it till here lol.

Please leave a COMMENT or a KUDOS to make the author happy.

The Angels frown, the devils worship II

Chapter 33: The Angels frown, the devils worship II

Armins trial is upon us.

New ao3 username, who this?

Hello everyone! Nice to see y'all here. This story is reaching its end and I once again wanted to thank all of you for reading and engaging with this fic. The next chapter will be the final chapter and the next one (35) will be an epilogue. Wow... It's hard to believe it's coming to an end like this T-T

Anyway, Enjoy and brace yourselves!

WARNIIING

WARNIIING

Death mentioned, assassination attempt. Suicide attempt. Unrealistic court. Armin is of course in a horrible mental space. Please do not read if not comfortable. The assassination+suicide happens after the emoji until the end of that section. Stay safe and remember-- this is a fic I wrote with no prior knowledge of pretty much anything.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The previous Timeline, 854.

Location: Royal castle.

The blade stopped. It nicked Eren's neck just for a stretch and stopped like a threat. "Stop." She tried one more time. "Stop it, Eren." For Ymir, it was the wrong thing to say.

The nightmare lost its color and morphed into something else. The Colossal titans' teeth disappeared and blue skies appeared in their place. Eren's view was no longer a shard of broken titan tooth but... The sunset?

Eren carved everything into his memory. It's a vision he had never seen before, and although he felt it might just be another nightmare, a nagging sensation told him to pay attention.

"Will you just tell me what's happening?"

"There's nothing."

"You ran away! Something is bothering you, Armin."

The winter chill runs through his body but Eren doesn't let it show. Even here near the beach, it's cold. The sun is setting behind them, another day coming to an end.

He found Armin on the beach. No, he searched every beach near Liberio after the scouts got Falco's call. Then he searched every beach known in Hizurus capitol after they got another call saying he was spotted there. His senses could track Armin right in this very spot and was overjoyed to actually find him.

Eren found him here, shaking from the cold but still staring at the breathtaking view of the sunset over the ocean.

Armin hugs himself, looking away from Eren. His short hair has barely grown since he was rescued. But he still fists his hands in

them just like he always does when he's stressed.

Eren can barely hold it anymore. "You're lying. Please tell me what's wrong-- I know--"

Armin sighs. "Fine, I'll tell you. Just don't ask anymore." he growls. "The Marleyans, they injected some poison or something. They said I wouldn't live for long."

Eren doesn't have to have future memories to know that's a lie. A bad one at that. A lie aimed just to change the subject.

"Marley is gone. Even when you were their prisoner--"

"Eren. Please. Stop."

For once, Eren plays into his manipulation. "Fine then... Let's do what we promised we'd do when we were kids." he says suddenly. "I don't believe you. Nothing's going to happen to you."

Eren's voice takes him off guard.

Armin stares at the beach in front of him, his eyes wide and his tongue unsure of how to voice his next words. "You mean... Our... Dream..." he whispers, not sure if Eren can hear him or not.

Eren does.

The next moment, warm hands turn him around and cup his face. Thumbs caress under Armin's eyes and all Armin can see is Eren's jade green orbs staring back at him with determination. Eren smiles as softly as he can possibly manage.

Armin's face is dry under his hands. Impossibly so. But Eren keeps caressing him, leaning just a little to kiss the blonde's forehead. "Our dream." he repeats, his eyes never shaking. "Let's do it. We're free, aren't we? Let's go explore as much as we can. Hizuru sounds like a good place to start right?"

The world is wider than they can travel.

Armin's shaking hands act on their own accord. He puts them on Eren's and Eren closes his eyes with a relieved sigh. "Armin..."

"I..." Armin murmurs. "I want..."

Eren hums, he has to summon a little bravery for what he says next. "If it's rotting, let us rot together. If it's flourishing, let us bloom together. But never let this fragile wind of life tear us apart." Eren Whispers.

Armin raises an eyebrow. "Since when are you good at literature?"

Eren chuckles. "Picked it up from one of the books Dina likes to read," he says. "So? What do you say?"

Eren leaned closer until his forehead was touching Armin's.

"You quoted it wrongly, it doesn't even rhythm properly."

"You get the memo, right?"

"Still doesn't change the fact that you quoted it wrongly."

Eren immediately understood what it was. It was a memory belonging to a future version of him. Much like one that he had from his fathers perspective about killing the Reiss family. Eren's sharp eyes took every detail he could because this was a memory he had never seen before.

Hope blossomed in his chest. Did Armin survive this? Will they recover? Would Eren convince Historia not to execute him?

Little clues crushed his dreams. In this memory, there were no titan footsteps on the beach, meaning it was a long time from now. Eren's rumbling did miles and miles of damage to all of Paradises shores.

So the memory was either from years from now, or simply a nightmare.

Armin didn't look older, and also he kept talking about death so--

Eren jumped awake. Cold sweat gathered around his skin, which he ignored. "Ymir!" he roared. "Show yourself, you bastard!"

And of course, the woman appeared as soon as she was summoned. Her expressionless face told Armin little about what he needed or what she wanted. "Is this what you meant!? What are you planning to do with Armin."

Ymir's blank face morphed into a frown. "So your ability to see the future hasn't changed."

"What!? What have you done?" he demanded.

Ymir shut her mouth and met Eren's angry glare with a variation of her own. "You don't own me. You can't order me?" she spat.

Confusion quickly turned into anger in Eren's heart. "Yes I do. As long as you're still alive, as long as the power of the titans exists, you're bound to the powers of the founding titan." he growled.

Ymir grit her teeth. "I'll be free... I'll get my sacrifice and finally be free." Then her smile turned wicked. "In fact, your little prisoner has is thinking about accepting my proposal."

"Proposal!?"

Ymir took a step forward, and Eren realized how much he hated the smile on her face. "Let me humor you. Yes, your prisoner will give me his heart in exchange to return back in time using the powers of the paths. And guess what, Yeager Eren, I will comply. And I will be set free. He will give me an answer before he's executed."

Eren looked down, what did that mean? His mind was clouded with a thousand questions at once. Time travel? Does Armin want to fix the past? It sure does sound like something Armin would do. That also explains why Ymir visited him a few days ago. Eren fisted his hands on his sides. "Revoke it."

"What?"

"I said," Revoke it, take back the deal." he demanded.

Ymir slowly shook her head, a mocking smile on her lips. "I won't." she said as a matter of fact. "Because I don't want to. I don't want to revoke what I've proposed to him."

"Then I'll do it." Eren shouted. "I--"

"Arlet has less than a day left to live." Ymir scoffed. "I'm not looking for other deals. He will accept it. You and your queen have left him no other option."

Ymir narrowed her eyes dangerously. She wanted Eren not to disturb her again and disappeared.

With newfound knowledge, Eren worked harder to keep the situation stable. He asked and asked Historia to stop Armin's execution, and each time she met the same response.

Historia would nod, say a few heartfelt words, and repeat the phrases that she needs to do to keep peace within paradise.

As the time grew shorter, so did Eren's temper. He threatened to transform and level this castle to the ground, he thought about escape routes and running away. Both thoughts were dismissed when he thought about Armin's blatant disapproval.

And yet, his heart wouldn't rest easy knowing Armin would make a deal with a highly unstable Ymir and put himself in endless danger.

Eren considered, for a moment, to go back in time himself. Only to remember he would most likely do it all again for the sake of his freedom and his friends.

So by the afternoon, mere hours before Armin's execution, Eren came up with a plan. "How about I give you another deal?" Eren told a confused founder Ymir. "I will take your place in the paths."

Ymir arched an eyebrow, but she waited for Eren to finish.

"You don't want to be a slave to paths all over again, do you?" Eren chuckled. "I'll do it for you."

Slowly, Ymir tilted her head. "And what do you want in exchange?"

"In exchange I'll make sure Armin stays alive during his time travel. And as your payment, I give you my heart instead of his."

Ymir sighed. "Your offer is tempting. But only the person with a heart's sacrifice can travel through time. If you're so keen on saving him, why not travel by yourself?" Ymir offered.

Eren fisted his hands at his sides. "He's more adaptable, he's smarter... He's better. He can save everyone else, I'll just repeat all the things I've done to this point. I know he will be the right choice." Eren said. "How about you replace his heart with mine after you got your payment? That way he'll still live afterwards."

"And you die."

"And I die."

"You do realize your alternative self might want to live past that date correctly, and he might never recover this timeline's memories." she reminded him.

"It's a risk I'm willing to take." Eren stood confidently. "So? Do you accept it or do you not?"

Ymir smiled from ear to ear. "we have a deal..." she said. "And just like your friend. Remember that I take payment upfront."

And just like that, Ymir disappeared once again.

A cold dread settled on his heart, knowing Armin could strike his head any moment now, and Eren's life would come to an end. The effects are taking place and he is growing more and more tired. On a whim, Eren decided where to spend his last moments in this reality.

He walked past the guards and down the dungeons until he was face to face with Armin sitting in a corner of his cell.

Their eyes met, And the cold disappeared as Eren remembered why he made that deal.

Eren played with the keys of Armin's cell until the doors opened. Neither said a word as he stepped inside.

Armin had long given up on keeping Eren away from himself. So he didn't protest when Eren got close to him. Eren leaned against the wall and slid down. He hit the ground with a loud thud right next to Armin. Eren didn't stay guard outside of his cell. Or came to check on his vitals like everytime else. He was sure that Armin was safe now.

Neither broke the silence.

Eren put his head over Armin's shoulder. It took all Armin's willpower not to flinch away. It seemed strange to want to be away from Eren when they were "touchy" all the time, according to their classmates in the training corps.

Then, Armin didn't know what was normal or abnormal. This isn't just a normal night in the barracks. Or a rare night at the beach. Tomorrow, Armin will be executed. Tomorrow, this timeline will be no more.

Eren smiled, "I'd say let's run away together." Those are Eren's first words to Armin tonight, he didn't intend them to be his last. Eren looks up and meets Armin's wide eyes with a gentle smile.

Eren gently reached for Armin's face, a gentle touch that's completely in contrast with his hardened hands.

Armin meets his eyes. He sighs, giving up on fate when he doesn't see what he was searching for in Armin's eyes. "But I know you will never run away." he murmured as he took his hand back.

Armin slowly closed his eyes. Eren puts his head back on Armin's shoulders and Armin hesitantly puts his head over Eren's. Fatigue finally wins the battle and Eren allows his body to rest in a damp and cold cell, and that's all he asks for.

They stayed like that until Eren's breathing turned into a gentle rhythm, signaling that he had fallen into a peaceful sleep, something Armin knew he hadn't had in at least a year.

Armin brushed Eren's hair out of his face, the most gentle touch he had given. He leaned down. "I'll fix this." Armin promised in his ears. "I'll fix this mess, I promise. I'll save our friends and I'll save you."

"Founder Ymir." he whispers. "I accept your deal." he forces the words out of his throat. "Take me back to three days before the rumbling so I can stop it."

Ymir took a moment to collect her thoughts. "You... Truly are a lucky lad to

have someone like him." she whispers. Armin doesn't know who she's referring to.

The world then blacks out.

Ymir's voice whispered in Eren's ear: "So, what time should I really send him?"

"To when it all started," Eren answered without a second thought.

"About damn time you did that..."

The voice echoes loudly in his ears. He massages his eyes and tries to turn the blinding golden light away. He slowly opens his eyes and focuses his vision on the person standing in front of him. It's not a young girl, no. He is around his age. With long long hair and a face that's hidden behind the shadows.

He's still in the paths, the same glowing tree, but it feels like the truth was finally laid bare for Eren to see.

"Who are you!?" Eren shouts, and demands the person.

The man shakes his head, he pushes his hands into his pockets and steps into the light, Eren sees his own face staring at him, and clicking his tongue. Eren of the paths smiles as looks down at him. "I believe you've seen yourself in the mirror enough to recognise me."

"Is this a game!?"

"It's not..."

"This is so fucked up." Eren growls. "This can't be... whatever, I don't even care! I'm done playing games." He stands up, and holds a threatening finger towards the Eren of the paths. "Just tell me where Armin is! I can't track him!"

"You can't do that easily." the other shakes his head. "Listen, I can finally tell you the truth while Ymir isn't around. Do you want to know what deal Armin has made or do you not?!?"

Eren's eyes widened. "Yes!" he demands. "Tell me every damn detail now." Eren fists a handful of white sand between his fingers. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? Why didn't--"

"I couldn't tell you. Neither could Armin. Ymir wouldn't let him." Eren explains. "I tried once. Kept sending you some future memories but Ymir always stopped me."

"Ymir!?"

Eren of the paths nods slowly. "Remember how Armin fell asleep in most inconvenient places? Well, Ymir made him fall asleep when she didn't want some things to change. She's been traveling with Armin since he made a deal." Eren of the paths narrows his eyes almost dangerously. "And the reason I can talk to you without interruption now, is that she is with Armin, far away from where we are now."

Eren presses his mouth to a thin line. "Then be done with it. Tell me what all this is about."

He chuckles. "I can't say it..." the other man holds his hand up and reaches for Eren's forehead. "But I can show you..." then he smiles. "A little warning-- it's filthy."

Eren doesn't flinch away, he stares down at the other Eren's eyes.

His fingers touch his forehead and memories he never knew he had floods Eren's mind.

The present timeline, 854.

Location: Royal castle.

Mikasa visits him that night. She radiates an aura of confidence and anxiety at the same time, that confuses Armin until it clicks in his exhausted mind what the reason might be.

Armin's eyes are seeing double now, it doesn't matter because he doesn't read his notes anymore, he knows them by heart. He has read every word and over thought every single interaction far too

many times. He's reached this crippling understanding that the answer is not in his notes and journals.

He looks up at Mikasa with dark bags under his eyes. He asks: "Is... Is the trial tomorrow?"

Mikasa slowly nods. "Yes." she says. "Falco will come in. So will a police officers from Hizuru and Paradise to say you had no weapons on you when Eren died."

Armin's heart skips a beat, his head lowers to the ground but Mikasa puts a hand on her shoulder.

"I don't care what you think." she says as a matter of fact. "It was impossible for you to have committed that crime, and I will prove it."

To her horror, Armin shakes his head. "What if I don't want you to?" he asks, her hand stills on his shoulder.

"What do you mean *Not want me to* ?" she snaps.

"Don't." Armin mumbles. "Just don't. It does poetic justice." his blue eyes stare deeply into Mikasa's stormy gray eyes. "I don't want to fight anymore. Let them hang me if they want yo."

Horried, Mikasa shakes his body. "No!" she yells. "Absolutely not! You can't think clearly right now."

Armin rubs his sore eyes. When was the last time he slept? Guessing from the dark corners around his vision and his slurred hearing, very long. He takes a deep breath and smiles at his lifelong friend. He wishes he could tell her she was the reason he jumped back in time to stop it all. If Mikasa wasn't killed, Armin wouldn't have been so desperate and stupid. He smiles bitterly. "I'm thinking more clearly than I ever have. I didn't kill Eren, But I deserve whatever punishment Dina will throw at me."

Mikasa lets out a shaky exhale.

"Just do one thing for me." she asks. "Sleep tonight... And don't open your mouth to say any of that at the court tomorrow, ok?"

Armin doesn't react.

After a few moments of silence. Mikasa grabs both of his shoulders. "You are not at fault, so you won't be punished." she vows. "Take a good night's sleep, Armin, I'll talk to you again in the morning."

Mikasa helps him stand up and gently pushes him towards the bed. She rushes out of his room and leaves Armin sitting on his bed and in the dark.

Armin stretches his hand over the covers and lies down. His eyes close before he can order them not to.

Dina fixes her crown and looks at her reflection for the last time.

Her hands are going to be tied today. The jury is a group of 13 high ranking military officials, none of whom know Armin personally. Her sole job today is to manage the courtroom and give a sentence if he's known guilty.

She looks at her own eyes, then her head and her crown. She notices the crown is tipped sideways and fixes it.

"Kenny." she says, looking at him from the shadows. "Do you know what you must do?"

Kenny throws his dagger and catches it in the air. "I do."

"Good." She clears her throat. "At the very least, I'll let that boy go cleanly."

Kenny clicks his tongue. "Ya can be honest with me, Ya know." he chuckles. "If you wanna kill him, just do it."

Dina narrows her eyes. "Oh, I don't *want* to kill him. In Fact, I want him to live. If he really did kill Eren, then a lifetime in solitary confinement will be worse than hell for Armin." she says as a matter of fact. Leaving Armin alone to deal with his thoughts for a lifetime is a guaranteed way to make him go mad. "I'm doing him and his reputation a favor. If he is convicted, then it'll do no one any good. We'll paint our image like murderers and torture the poor boy."

Kenny rolled his eyes. "And everyone thinking' he killed himself is good because...?"

"Do your job and don't question me." she says firmly. "... I am getting late."

Kenny's questioning gaze follows her until she walks out of her room.

When she walks inside the courtroom, everyone stands up and salutes to her. She nods at them and sits on her place on the top. Next to her, Premier Zachary sits down and addresses the guard.

Dina looks to her left and right. She's not surprised to see Historia and Mikasa sitting on two opposite sides, both watching her closely. The dead silence leaves no room for her to break it.

The doors open and two guards bring Armin in the center of the courtroom. Armin walks voluntarily and sinks down to his knees without needing to be prompted. They secure his hands behind his back and into the ground with a loud "clunk" sound.

Armin doesn't lift his head or look around once. It's pitiful, Dina wished she could, for once, understand what this boy was up to. She waits for Armin to react, he'll have to acknowledge her eventually, say something in his defense. Armin looks horrible, even Mikasa's best efforts have failed to hide his black eyes and messy hair. Worst of all, all that cologne suggests the clean and well kept advisor Dina grew to respect was long gone.

She lets out a deep sigh. "Alright, let's see what we have here." She puts on a new pair of reading glasses, thicker than what she usually wears. She skim read the reports and noticed the person defending Armin wasn't Mikasa, But Hange. Within all their work, Dina wonders how did the commander of the scouts find the time?

And on the other side, there is a military police officer by the name of Justivs accusing Armin of the murder. She has never seen the man before, but it was standard procedure to have someone accusing in Historia's place and defending her claim.

Dina looks at Historia from the corner of her eyes. Sitting next to her wife, she looks fiercely determined and doesn't back off from Dina's glare.

Dina closes her notes. She looks right in front of her, Armin's head is bowed low. "Armin, do you understand that you are accused of first degree murder?" she asks, her annoyed tone less masked than before.

Armin doesn't answer, there is no point in doing so.

Dina's face falls neutral, perfectly concealing any emotions she might be feeling. "Then let's start." she announced, and nodded at the group of strangers who were here as the jury. "The accuser please state your claim."

An officer in his fifties, dressed to perfection and no emotions visible on his face stands up. "I am here today to represent Princess Historia Reiss and the state to accuse Armin Arlert of first degree murder of Eren Yeager," he says. He turns to the rest of the jury. "Military police investigation shows that at the time of murder, the two were alone with no other soul in sight for miles. Armin Arlert was found covered in Eren Yeagers blood and he confessed to the murder at the site. " he held up a folder. "The evidence presented shows that Although the exact cause of Eren Yeager's death is unclear, he was missing a heart and had cut ribs and skin. According to the forensics and the pattern of blood on Armin Arlert and Prince

Yeager, it can be said that they were facing each other and the only person capable of striking the killing blow is the accused. It might sound unbelievable, but if we keep the torture Mr Arlert went through in mind, along with the fact that prince yeager was the reason he went to Liberio and got captured, we'll realise it was both physically and mentally possible for Mr Arlert to have killed Prince Yeager."

Then, he turns to Dina. "The evidence speaks for itself. A Prince of this nation has been murdered and Armin Arlert can be the only murderer. We expect the law to bring justice as it is supposed to." he says.

Hange stands up before his speech is finished. They hit the non-existent dust off of their uniform and comically put a thick folder of their counter-evidences in front of them. "And now, Dear judges and juries, I am going to prove why that statement can be easily rectified." they tell everyone. "Just because there is no other suspect, doesn't mean Armin Arlert is the one deserving punishment."

Hange clears their throat. "There are alot of people willing to testify and a lot of evidence that proves not only Armin Arlert had no intention of harming Prince Yeager, but also he had no weapon on him that matched the wound. I will call in a number of witnesses and evidence that will prove that at no point in Armin and Eren's journey, Armin tried to harm Eren." they tell the jury. "Very well, let's run this all over one more time. Eren Yeager left Paradise on the 30th of January to the destination of Hizuru. That's the last time he was spotted alive on the island. then went to Hizuru to find Armin Arlert. I call the chief of Hizuran police as witness."

A man steps forward and walks up to the witness place next to Dina. Armin recognises that man, it's the same one that directed them directly to the palace instead of their hotel about a year ago. He steps forward towards the queen and almost doubles over as he bows to her. "I am a member of the diplomatic police of Hizuru, Manjiro Sato." he introduces himself, bows once again to the jury, and sits down.

Hange turns to the man. "Lieutenant Sato, Will you swear to say the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"I swear it." The policeman nods.

Hange starts. "What are your recount of events from the moment Eren Yeager contacted you onwards."

"Forgive my Marleyan-- I mean-- forgive my Paradisian, I am not very fluent in your language." the man clears his throat. "I was with my colleagues when the news of the Eldian prince reached us. Of course, the... Uh... The diplomatic embassy had told us prior but we were told he would come a few days after that... The prince was too worried he'd lose track of the... The person he was following."

"And who was this person?"

The policeman looks at Armin. "Him. Armin Arlert-san. I don't know how he could track him but he found him in the northern white beaches just the next day."

"Interesting. What happened next?"

"Him and Prince Yeager spent a few more days in our nation before they received their Hizuran passports issued by the Azumabito tribe and left Hizuru." He answered. "During which they explored Hizuru together. I was on duty and checked them regularly."

"And during any of your checkups... Was there ever any sign of Mr Arlert being hostile towards prince Yeager?"

"None... In Fact, Prince Yeager seemed to be more in charge of their travels and their future. Before he found Arlert-san... He was completely restless. I do not believe Arlert-san would harm him. Not during their time Hizuru."

"The forensics claim Eren Yeager was most likely killed by a sharp knife or dagger. Did... At any point... Armin has any weapon

resembling that?"

"None. Security in Hizuru's border is taken very seriously. He had no such thing when he came abroad or left Hizuru."

Hange nods. "Thank you, Lieutenant. There are no more questions from me." Hange says and sits down.

Justivs stands up. "Thank you for coming to our court, Lieutenant Sato. Could you tell me how long you've been in the diplomatic police force?"

Sato nods. "I have been a part of the diplomatic police for twenty-three years."

"And how many times have you been guarding the diplomats?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that question."

"Ah forgive me. Let me ask this way: have you ever seen close companions of the people you protect betray them and try to harm them?"

That made the policeman hesitate. "... I have."

"Do you believe it was possible for Arlert to do something similar?"

"Arlert-san had none of the resources to carry out such a plan. He was extremely dependent on Prince Yeager and--."

"In Hizuru."

The policeman became visibly offended when Justivs interrupted him. "Excuse me?"

"He had none of those resources *in Hizuru* . He was extremely dependent on the prince yeager *in Hizuru* ." Justivs corrects. "There is no guarantee that it would stay like this almost eight months later, is there?"

Hange stands up. "Objection. That is not a question."

"I have no other questions." Justivs says immediately. "Thank you for your service, Lieutenant."

Dina hums quietly. The policeman is guided back to the audience and Hange stands up once again. "If the Queen allows it, I will call my next witness, Falco Grice from the New-eldian zone of Liberio."

Dina allows it with a nod.

Falco is short enough that his body can't be seen until he's in the witness chair and his head can be seen from above. "Hello..." he says, first to the audience. He then awkwardly looks up at the Queen. "... Good morning..." he mumbles awkwardly. "... My name is Falco Grice."

Hange smiles at him, hoping to calm the mood. "Mr Grice, Will you swear to say the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"... I do." Falco says after a moment of hesitation. Falco stares at Armin, who is still looking at the ground with lifeless eyes.

Waiting... Waiting...

Hanges voice snaps his attention back to the court. "So, Mr Grice. Let's start from before. You knew Armin Arlert since he was undercover in Marley, correct?" they ask.

The boy's hands fist over his lap. "Yes." he says. "He was Mr Oswin at the time. Our librarian. I was so happy the library was open again so I spent a lot of my free time there... between warrior training and homework."

"It was you who told Prince Yeager where Armin was going, correct?"

Falco nods several times. "Yes. After Mr Armin left, I was worried for him. So I called Prince Yeager and told him Mr Armin was going to Hizuru."

"When Armin left Liberio... Or when he was in Liberio... Did he have any weapons?"

Falco shrugged. "The closest thing he had to a weapon was Miss Annie's ring, which he gave back to Mr Leanhardt before he left Liberio. He had no guns or swords or knives." he says. "Even if he did... He doesn't look like the person who knew how to use them."

Hange nods. "Good good. Mr Grice, you have first hand experience involving international borders and the treatment Eldians receive outside of the walls. Is it possible for a traveler like Armin to carry a weapon, similar to the one the forensics claim he killed Eren with, from border to border?"

Falco shook his head. "The border control-- especially around countries like Marley and its enemies-- is too tight. Even soldiers aren't allowed weapons. If Mr Armin did carry anything like that, he would be caught immediately. Even if no one knew he was an Eldian."

Hange turned to the jury. "Please note that Armin had no weapons like that in Liberio before he was with Eren. He didn't have that when he was reunited with Eren. And couldn't have had it while traveling." they tell them. Hange turns to Falco with a smile. "Thank you for your testimony Mr Grice."

Falco nods, the smallest of nervous smiles appearing on his lips. "Thank you."

Falco's relief was short-lived as he turned to face the cold indifferent look on Justivs face. "Mr Grice..." he says slowly. "Both you and your brother were warrior candidates... Is that true?"

"Yes." Falco says, quickly.

Justivs opens his folder and points his finger at something in front of him. "Here, it says you were also present in the attack of Marley on Paradise. Not only that, you were also present When Armin Arlert

was being tortured for information after his secret mission was discovered."

"I wasn't, actually. That's my brother." Falco corrects him. "We weren't allowed near that ultra secret facility in the mountains."

Justivs closes his folder. "Armin was tortured there, correct? Has anyone ever returned from that facility with their sanity intact?"

"OBJECTION!" Hange shouts. "It's irrelevant."

Justivs held up his hands. "I'll change my question. Why did Mr Arlert come to Liberio?"

Falco blinks in surprise. "I... I don't know. He never mentioned it."

"He left Paradise almost as soon as he could. His doctors note that he was still unstable by the aftermath of his torture, so I ask again, do you have a guess on why he came to Liberio."

Falco presses his mouth to a thin line. "I don't know."

"This is irrelevant." Hange yells. For once, Dina agrees. She turns to Justivs to warn him. "Please do not approach this subject unless you have a point to make."

Justivs leans back. He opens his folder again and skimm reads it once again. "Let's change the subject," he says. "Interesting. In your testimony you said you recognised Armin on the ship to Liberio after it was taken over by paradise. Why didn't you say anything to the authorities?"

Falco swallows hard. "The slightest suspicion would delay my reunion with my family... And my brother was still a titan in Paradise. He was... Uh... recently freed. By Eren Yeagers orders. I couldn't risk it. Besides, I wasn't sure if he smuggled there or just was there legally."

Justivs nods. "You also said Eren had given you a direct link to him, quote-unquote 'to call if you needed anything', correct?"

"Yes, he gave me this number. Primarily so I could get updates for my brother. And so he could inform me when he was a human again. Or if I ran into any complications back in Liberio."

"And you used that number to inform him where Armin Arlert was. You said you weren't sure if Armin was a runaway or not."

"Mr Armin... Uh well..." Falco stares blankly at Armin's head. "He uhm... He confessed at some point that he was running away." Falco admits quietly. "But the paradisian soldiers never looked for him... so, technically, he was on vacation."

"All I understand is that Armin Arlert had no real reason to go to Liberio other than running away. Presumably, running away from his problems, the weight of his torture, Marleys attack, and the deaths of his friends and family... I do not blame him, that's enough to make anyone go mad."

"No! You're wrong." Falco says immediately. "Do you want to say he went crazy at some point and killed Mr Eren? No. No, he didn't. That's why I'm here, to tell you that!" Falco shakes his head. "Mr Armin didn't have any weapons on him. He didn't even plan to meet up with Eren Yeager at any point! Whatever happened between them, Eren Yeagers death is not his fault. I'm sure!"

That makes Armin look up. His wide blue eyes stare at Falco, stupidly glaring at him. How can he... Be so sure of himself?

Armin's reaction pulls more attention to himself than he planned. He sighs and slowly looks down again. For a moment, he can feel the hope bloom in Mikasa's eyes. He looks at her. Jean, Mikasa, and Hange are on the same side. Surprised, Armin looks to his left and sees Carla nowhere in sight.

Where is she?

Justivs clears his throat. "I have no other questions." he says and sits down.

The guards lead Falco out of the witness chair. Hange immediately stands up and asks the Queen. "Can I call in my next Witness? It's the last one."

Dina allows it with a wave of her hand.

The next person sits on the witnesses chair is a man in the military Police attire. He introduces himself and Hange began asking the questions immediately. "I have only a few questions to ask, officer Blues. Did Armin have any weapons when he stepped foot in paradise?" Hange asks.

The MP shakes his head. "No. We were quite suspicious of them so we searched thoroughly. And no, they were carrying no weapons."

"Good. Good. How long does it take to go from the port, to the crime scene by foot?"

"About two hours. An hour and a half, if you walk very fast."

"Interesting, and where is the closest shop that sells such knives?"

"It's probably in Jenea. Maybe three or four hours away by foot. And no. The two of them could not have gone to Jenea, bought the weapon and then came back to commit a crime on that beach."

"Thank you, Officer. I have no more questions." Hange nods. They turn to the jury with a bitter smile. "As we heard, and all the witnesses told us, Armin Arlert could not have carried or purchased a weapon like the murder weapon to commit this crime."

Dina presses her mouth to a thin line. "Officer Justivs, do you have any questions from officer Blues?" she asks.

"No, my Queen." Justivs offers. "I would like to call Dr Denise instead, head of Paradieses morgue and the person in charge of

Prince Yeagers autopsy."

The woman is quite young for her title. She walks with elegance and her brown hair is pulled back in a painfully tight bun. She swears with a lot of hesitance and readies herself for the questions.

"Dr Denise, were you directly involved with Prince Yeagers autopsy?"

"Ah yes. Due to how delicate the whole thing was, I was the only person allowed to perform the operation. This is the most important and... Most interesting case I've ever had." the doctor says with a smile. "It was unfortunate that I got to know the famous Prince that way."

Her attempt at humor merely made the others tense. She laughs awkwardly. "Anyway, how may I help you?"

"Can you tell the cause of death for Prince Yeager?"

The doctor presses her mouth to a thin line. "I'm afraid it's more complicated than I can summarize. You see, The primary cause of Prince Yeager's death is blood loss. Due to the wound on his chest. That is what I assumed when I first came upon the crime scene but..." she licks her lips. "In the autopsy I noticed that Prince Yeagers heart was missing."

"Can you describe what you mean?"

The doctor sighs loudly. "That's the problem. At first I assumed his heart... This organ... was simply missing. But that theory has a lot of problems. For one, the wound on his chest wasn't large enough that someone could just stick their hand in and pull it out. And that act would make much *much* more bloodshed than what I found in the crime scene. Although by the time I reached there, the sea could have cleaned away a lot of it." she explains. "But I also found signs of titan healing. Which makes blood loss the more likely cause of his death... The wound could have also halted the healing process."

Again-- there is a lot we don't know and the sea could have washed away literally anything. So I can't say anything for certain."

"Allow me to ask a more specific question..." Justivs asks. "Do you believe the murder happened before or after the power of the titans vanished."

"Oh, he definitely died before." The doctor says with certainty. "All titan shifters experienced something called "black spine" when they lost their titans. It's recorded not only for Princess consort Ymir but also for all the pure titans that retained their human form once the powers vanished. Prince Yeager had none of that, which means he died before he lost his titan... But... And that's where it gets complicated... His healing powers never kicked in to heal the wound that caused his death... Which suggests he might have died *during* the time he was losing his powers."

"Does this kind of wound kill a normal titan shifter?"

"Of course not. Our research shows titan shifters have survived worse. In fact, Eren Yeager survived much worse injuries and a literal hole in his chest with his titan."

"And would that kill a normal human being?"

"Oh Yes. Ten times over."

"You mentioned that his titan healing could have been in the process of healing a much more intense wound due to his missing heart. At the rate of a normal titan shifter's regenerative powers, do you think his healing power had enough time to heal Eren Yeager?"

"Titan healing is a-- was a big question mark in our data but... It was possible."

"So, what you're saying is that it's possible that Prince Eren was dealing with an injury that could have healed on his own."

"It... It is possible. Our knowledge isn't too--"

"And the only way to halt that process is to make a greater wound."

"Uh... Yes?"

"So, in the exact moment that Eren Yeager was most vulnerable, he suffered an injury that took priority away from his titan healing. Only to lose his titan powers and die before he truly lost his titan."

"That... That could be the reason."

"If that is true. Then timing is extremely important, correct? Slight sooner or later and the Prince would not have died."

"In that scenario... Yes. The timing of the murder was very important."

Justivs face cracks a smirk for a moment before it disappears under another cold and careless facade. He turns to the jury with a sad face. "Please note that Armin Arlert was the only person who knew about the power of the titans vanishing. He was the person who warned Queen Dina. And the only person who could have done this act during this crucial time frame."

Justivs turns to the Queen. "I have no further questions. My Queen, I have one more witness left, if Commander Hange has no questions of Doctor Denise." he says.

Dina arches an eyebrow. She looks at her records and her eyes widen. Before she can address it, Historia stands up. "I want to testify." she says, loud and clear.

Hesitantly, Dina nods and Historia is guided to the witnesses chair. She sits down and leans back, waiting for the man to ask his questions.

"Princess historia... Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth?"

"I swear." Historia says without a doubt.

"Very well. Let me start with the question that we all want to ask. What made you press charges against Mr Arlert when not even Eren Yeagers own family members wanted to."

Historia doesn't miss a beat. "Because even I had a hard time convincing myself Armin is the killer. If there was one thing impossible on this earth was Armin, Eren and Mikasa hurting each other... And yet here we are." She takes a deep breath. "Armin is a strange person to deal with. He always seems to know something from the future. He's smart and can see things no one else can. It's an ability I truly admire and I was at peace with its consequences until now."

"Is there any reason that you believe Armin would harm Prince Yeager?"

Historia nods slowly. "When Eren and I first met in training camps, we didn't really know each other well. We bonded over time mostly because of the difficulties we faced with the secrets we were trying to keep in the survey corps. One of the things Eren was struggling with was Armin's mysterious hostility to him... Which apparently started out of nowhere and then disappeared when they started dating. Armin is a... Armin has always been a master manipulator and I was... Was a witness to how Armin captured Annie. How he treated Reiner and berthold despite knowing they were the titans who broke the wall... I noticed how he wanted to sacrifice me to make sure Ymir turned into a titan in utgard castle and I... I saw how he tore this place apart to make sure we don't use the rumbling in the war... so I don't trust his facial expressions. And I can't tolerate the thought of letting Eren's killer run free. Armin certainly has a goal he wanted to accomplish with Eren's death, I don't know what it is, but I don't want to play into it. Maybe he always planned to kill him. Maybe he's not the killer. I don't know, and I've learned not to trust Armin's word or actions for its face value."

"Can you explain the... Hostility you mentioned."

"I didn't see it myself but... Eren used to tell me how Armin kept a distance from him for a long time. Eren also... the height of it was when they first discovered Eren's titan and... And Eren kept referring to himself as a monster and... and I believe Armin was indirectly responsible for some of it. In fact, Armin interfered with so many events that I doubt there is anything in this nation that he's not a part of. But anyway. Eren's quest for freedom always seemed to bother Armin... As I said, it all disappeared after a while, and I'm not sure which one was Armin's manipulation and which one was his true colors."

Historia's words ring a bell in Armin's mind. She is right. She has a right not to trust him anymore. His manipulative tendencies always seem to make people uncomfortable and hostile to him. And with all the effort it took to make sure the rumbling doesn't happen--

Berthold...

Annie...

Grandpa...

Marco and Sasha...

All those people who were maimed or killed during Marley's attack...

They all died because of the changes he made in the timeline, or things he couldn't prevent.

"Don't shed your crocodile tears now." Historia laughs bitterly.

Her words make him notice the lone frustrated tear that has escaped his eyes.

Historia scoffs. "You weren't shedding them when you were playing us like some instruments. You weren't affected when Eren was actually struggling with his titan, or when you were so ok with sending me and Ymir to our deaths that night in Utgard castle."

Historia takes a calming breath. "I did care for you, Armin. You saved my life. Saved Ymir's life. Everyone's life... many times. But they always came at the expense of something greater. Take Marley's attack for example, you took such a drastic measure to make sure Eren didn't use the rumbling that it cost us five thousand people including our friends and your own grandfather. Not to mention you were being tortured for months and you never quite got to be yourself after that." she leans back. "I'm sorry. I don't know what your reason was for killing Eren, but I don't want to ignore it and find out."

Historia slams her hands to the table and stands up. "I'm done." she says and moves back to the audience's place.

Dina follows her with her eyes. She turns to Armin to find him silent once again. He grips her pen tightly. "Armin, you are being accused of killing Eren." Dina repeats. "Say something. Don't you want to defend yourself?"

Armin raises his head, just to check on the audience again. This time, his eyes met a new person. Carla stares at him, more surprised than hate. Shame grips the back of his neck and shoves his head down. He can't keep eye contact and can't answer Dina either.

"Jury..." Dina says through grit teeth. "You have three hours." she says instead of the overly polite and complicated sentence she has to say.

Three hours later. The group of complete strangers had agreed on Armin's fate.

Armin knew what they were thinking. Even Hange and Mikasa's best efforts couldn't stop these people from trying to please their princess. Historia is the heir to the throne and without strong evidence, nothing will go against her.

The representatives of the juries stand up with a small note in her hand. "The jury is unanimous, we find Armin Arlert guilty of first

degree murder."

The bullet is fired and Armin finds himself taking a long breath. His knees have started to hurt and he wishes it would all finish.

"What!?" Mikasa's sudden yell takes everyone by surprise. Jean tries to keep her back and it's the only factor stopping her from strangling the jury.

Dina closes her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Armin." he says. "... This court declares... Armin Arlert..." Dina slowly closes her mouth. Her eyes stare at the top of Armin's head, as he refuses to face any of them, and she thinks. She puts her hammer aside without making any noise and ignores Mikasa and Historia's demanding looks. "A break." she declares. "The judgment will continue tomorrow morning."

"What!?" Historia snaps at the same time Mikasa lets out a sigh of relief that can barely be heard. The room drowns in different muttering and confusion at what Dina means.

Armin raises his head, he's not surprised Dina stopped the court. His first words shatters the muttering: "What are you waiting for, My Queen?"

Mikasa stares at him. He's holding his head up and looking directly at the queen, no remorse in his eyes, instead he's smirking.

"Finally decided to talk?" Dina shoots back.

Armin ignores it. "I know what you want to do. Don't hesitate, what are you waiting for?" his smirk grew. "Do you want me to do it myself?"

Dina grinds her teeth together. "Of course you'd know." she whispers to herself, quietly enough so that no one would hear.

Instead, Mikasa stands up. All her confusion turned into anger. "What do you mean--" she shouts. "Is there--"

Jean grabs her hand to pull her down. Countless eyes stare at them. "Mikasa." he whispers but she doesn't budge.

Dina hits her hammer again. "Dismissed." she announced. "The court will continue tomorrow at nine."

The guards release Armin's hands and push him up to his aching feet. He can't keep standing after kneeling so long so the guards carry most of his weight.

"Armin!" Mikasa yells. "What do you mean by all of this?"

Armin's eyes soften, he turns to face Mikasa for the last time. "I'm sorry." he says. "I'm so sorry..."

The doors closed and shut their eye contact.

"What do you mean I can't visit!?" she yells at the guard. The usual guards at Armin's room were changed and Mikasa knows nothing of the new guards. "Open this damn door." she demands.

"I can't." The guard repeats.

Jean steps forward. "That's illegal. We have the right to visit Armin."

The guard doesn't budge. "I can't allow that, the orders are from above."

"I'll show you above--"

Jean's hand stops her before she can reach for the guard. "Mikasa." he hisses. "If we attack the guards, it'll end badly for Armin. Come on, We'll just ask Hange for their direct order, they can't disobey them." he shot a look at the guard from the corner of his eyes. "There is a hierarchy here." he growls angrily.

Mikasa stomps her feet as they walk as fast as they can to Hanges quarters. But right around the corner, Mikasa bumps into Carla.

Carla looks around the corner. She lets out a shaky breath.
"Mikasa..." Carla asks calmly. "Is that all Armin had to say in the court?"

Mikasa turns towards her. "Yes..." she adds slowly. "I know, it's unlikely of him not to have a trick up his sleeve--"

Carla's eyes narrow. She looks at the suspects place one last time and sighs, loud and tired. "Oh that stupid... Stupid boy."

"We're trying to uhm... Get Hange orders to let us visit."

Carla shakes her head. "I will find my own way. Go ahead." she smiles at her. "Don't give up on Armin, ok?"

Their paths converge. Carla, instead of seeking a higher member of the military, decides to ask for a favor. She walks to the other side of the castle and finds another royal room in a higher level.

The guards recognise her and allow her to knock. A moment later, the door opens and Carla finds Historia and Ymir playing with their infant. "Hello, dear." Carla says. Her eyes fall over the baby in Ymir's arms. She smiles. "Ow, look how she's grown! When was the last time I saw her..."

Ymir holds up her baby proudly. "I'm giving her your formula. Looks like it's working~" she says.

Carla gently tickles under the baby's chin. She smiles. "She's growing. I wish I could meet her more often."

Historia nods. "Yeah... We've been busy, especially lately." she says awkwardly.

"Yes, I'm sorry, that's why I'm here. Can I ask for a favor?" she says. "I need to talk to Armin."

Historia takes a deep breath. She slowly shakes her head. "They don't allow visitors, do they?" she asks.

Carla feels panic rise in her chest. "Do you know what that means? Because I am very confused." she asks.

Historia shakes her head in disappointment. "I can... I can just assume the worst. It means Dina is up to something. And whatever it is, she doesn't want anyone else involved." she says as a matter of fact. Historia stands up. "Carla... If you want to talk to Armin, we should hurry."

====*** **=====

Armin knew it. He knew it for a long time now. From the moment he noticed the "flaws" in his room and how easily his creative mind started to create scenarios. He was in no shortage of options. From the curtain ropes or cord tie backs that were just the right strength not to snap on his weight, to the sharpeners, papers and scissors that were "accidentally" left in supplies.

It's as if Dina was *daring* him to do it.

Armin did fall into its temptation once. Just to check if his theory was correct. He took the curtain ropes like a real rope and tested its strength. It was unyielding. He took it and wrapped it around his neck. The rough material stayed in one piece no matter how much Armin pulled and struggled.

But then, the least he owed Eren's loved ones was to watch their son/brother/friend's killer pay for his sins. So he stopped himself from making a hang and letting the rope grant him his freedom.

And now, Armin knows those weren't traps. Those were evidence. The moment Dina rescheduled his sentencing, Armin knew. She wanted him dead, but she wanted him to be an open, unsolved case. Not a stain on her little perfect royal family.

The cold hands of death are inching closer and closer, Armin can almost feel their frozen touch on his skin and waiting to welcome him in their embrace.

Today is the day. The moment he was shoved into his room after the courtroom, he knew.

His first clue is the food, the person who delivered it was a different maid and put it on Armin's office table instead of near the bed where the maids were instructed to do so. Something in that beautiful fish of chicken stew is spiked. Armin smirks, it's definitely the cup of water.

He laughs to himself. The time is coming, and it's coming fast. He stands up from his place between the mountain of notebooks and journals and walks over to his table. An unbelievable weight drops from his shoulders with the news. Dina has ordered his assassination, and the only thing Armin has to do to start it is to drink this cup. This poison.

Armin inspects it closely. His way out is right in his hand.

Armin puts it away with a sigh. He walks to the bathroom and looks at his own reflection. He runs his hands through his face. He looks awful, with dark bags and unruly long hair and... He blinks in surprise. Apparently he can grow small and colorless facial hair.

He can't meet Eren or his grandfather this way. He feels disgusted. He needs to be presentable to meet his deceased loved ones. He takes a deep breath and opens the water to see if it's working. The shower has warm water running down it. He takes his clothes off and folds it away for the maids to dispose of after he's gone.

Warm runs down his body and he washes away the dirt and grime that's gathered in the past few weeks. The tangles in his hair takes a lot of energy to come undone, and Armin finally decides to cut it after the shower.

He comes out clean, and Armin feels relieved. He walks to the mirror and smiles, he already looks better. To Armin's surprise, he finds a pair of scissors in the third drawer. He looks at the shiny scissors. Which one of these "traps" will Dina's mercenaries choose to kill him with, he wonders.

Armin takes a fistful of his hair and cuts it. He does it gently, it's been a while since he has done his hair and he wants it to be the best it can be. When he's done. He has the same haircut as he did from before he traveled back in time.

Now, he looks presentable.

He searches the drawers more and finds a jar of dark green substance. It was Historia's present from so long ago, maybe it was his birthday. Armin never had time or energy to use it, so it stayed here to gather dust. Now, Armin opened the can without much thought and stared at the green and white cream inside.

Curiosity gets the better of him and he applies a generous amount of his cheek, and then spreads it all over his face. He laughs at his reflection when his face is all covered. He washes them away carefully. Afterwards, His reflection didn't look any different, but when he touched it, his skin felt much smoother. "Wow..." he laughs. "I've had Historia's secret to perfect skin laying in my vanity all this time."

Armin takes a deep breath and looks at himself very carefully to find flaws. He finds none. He changes into a clean white shirt and pants left from before he left and walks out of the bathroom.

"I am ready..." Armin picked up the cup and drank it entirely.

He lies down on his bed. He enjoys the sense of the blankets against his clean skin and waits until the poison does its trick.

Armin wakes up in steps.

At first, he notices being dragged on the ground. Then he blacks out. The second time he feels a tight string around his wrists but his hands don't respond when he tries to pull at them.

The last time is when he truly regains his senses. He opens his eyes and finds himself in the bathtub he never used with his hands tied above his head on the tap. He tries to sit up but his body barely responds.

The shadow near the vanity notices his movement. A moment later, Kenny stands above him

Armin chuckles. "Hello," he smiles, but his smile doesn't reach his eyes. "I was expecting you..."

"Wow..." he says, flipping his hat up. "You look better. Last time you looked like crap."

Armin's smile turns into a smirk.

"Now you don't look much better." he growls. Kenny flips his dagger and hides it back in his coat. "I wanted to let you pick your way out." he says as a matter of fact. "But you suddenly took a bath and now the only believable option for a suicide is that you slit your wrists in there."

Armin laughs out loud.

"The poison was supposed to knock you out." Kenny says and sits down on the tub. "How are you still awake?"

The calm fog in his mind clears for a moment, Armin's lips form an O, then he smiles. "The Marleyans..." he mumbles.

"What?"

Armin bursts into laughter, his lungs heave up and down and a permanent smile is pasted to his lips. "I must have-- HAHA--" Armin

says between laughs. "--I must have built up some immunity-- when-- HA-- they were torturing me."

Armin grins. "It's ok! You can do your job, I won't resist."

Kenny narrows his eyes. "You're awfully pliant." Kenny chuckles. "... You really were a slave to love, huh." Kenny raises the Sharp scissors for Armin to see. He cleans it with his sleeve. "Don't worry. You won't feel a thing."

Suddenly, there was a knock on Armin's door. It prompted Kenny to work faster.

Kenny unties his hands from above his head. Armin keeps them obediently in front of him. He allows Kenny to put the shining side of the Sharp scissors against his wrists. The only hesitance is coming from Kenny himself. He had one eye at the door, where a small knocking was coming from.

"Any last words?" Kenny asks.

Armin shrugs. "I don't really want to think about my last words. I won't be able to choose one." he says.

"That's one hell of a last word, kid." Kenny growls. He takes Armin's right hand and presses the edge to Armin's skin and moves it over his wrist without much force first. The second time, he presses down with the intention to strike.

The knocking gets louder. "Armin?" Carla's voice comes from the other side. "Armin, I need to talk to you."

Armin's blood runs cold. He snaps his head towards the bathroom door. "It's Carla..." Armin mumbles, surprised. "Why is she...?" he raises his head and turns to Kenny. "Can I talk to her?"

Kenny chuckles. "If you haven't noticed, kid, you're being assassinated." he points out. "I can't just let someone in--"

"She deserves to yell at me." Armin interrupts. He needs to make Kenny let him go so Carla can yell at him all she wants. "And besides, if she made it all the way here, it means someone of high status is with her. My money is on Dina. Isn't she the one who ordered you to do this?"

Armin shrugs. "Besides. Isn't it a better cover for suicide if she yells at me then I kill myself?"

Kenny frowns. He pulls the blade back and rolls his eyes. "Your brain is wired differently, kid. You're strange. Go on. I'll wait in the bathroom." he says with a bit of warning.

Armin thanks him and walks over to the door with trembling feet. "Come in." he says the moment the door of the bathroom is closed.

His door opens just for a moment for Carla to walk in. Armin meets Hsitoria's pitiful gaze just for a moment. Carla steps in. She offers a smile. "Armin..." she says, her smile soft and gentle. "You look... so much better."

Why is she...

Why is she smiling at me?

Armin fails to understand how she can be so kind.

I killed your son.

hate me, loaf me, chant my death to the skies.

why are you being so kind to me?!?

Carla walks over to him. Her hesitant hands reach up to cup his face the way he did with Eren. "Armin..." she says, looking directly into Armin's eyes. "Why didn't you tell them about your deal with Ymir?"

Armin flinches back. He stares at Carla surprised and shocked. "What-- what do you--" he stutters. "How do you know about that!?"

Carla holds her hands up to mean she has no threat. "Look at me Armin. You saved me from dying that day in Shiganshina, didn't you?" she says.

A lone tear streamed down Armin's face. "How do you... How do you know that--" he mumbles. He falls to his knees, his other senses grow numb. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry..." Armin buries his face in his hand "If I... If I had the chance I would have reverted everything."

He gasps, his lungs incapable of doing anything other than inhaling short gasps of air. As he poured his soul out into his tears. "I'm sorry- I'm sorry-- I didn't mean to make that deal and kill your son. I killed him. It was I who killed him."

Carla covers the lower half of her face and takes a deep breath. She listens to him and doesn't interrupt him.

Armin looks up, "If I knew the price was so high-- I--I wouldn't take--take it." he says, a little louder. "I'm sorry, Carla... I'm so- so sorry! But don't worry. After my execution, it will finally be over. All the pain and suffering of everyone in that world will be forgotten forever and... And I can finally pay for everything I've done." Armin quickly tries to wipe away his tears with the palms of his hands. "I'll be gone soon. Don't--Don't worry."

"No, If you die here, the last thing I have of Eren will be gone." Carla says as a matter of fact. "Stand up."

Armin lifts his head, his jaw drops. "What... What do you mean?" his voice continues to drop.

Instead of trying to pull Armin to his feet, Carla sits down to be at his eye level. "A day before he came to find you... He visited me for the last time." Carla explains, slowly sitting down on the floor.

Her gentle hands cup Armin's face and gently nudge his head up. Armin doesn't dare to defy her so he sits up as well, but even then, he can't meet her kind eyes.

"When he visited... He told me about the other timeline." Carla explains, her hand caressing Armin's face. "He told me about the mistakes he made. And he told me how you made a deal with founder Ymir to go back in time."

Her hand pushes under his chin, he is forced to look up and meet her eyes. To his surprise they are devoid of any hate, just appreciation.

"Eren explained everything." She tells him. "How can I hate you? When you are the reason he lived a good life and met his goals and dreams?"

"I... I don't understand."

"Eren knew the best way to save everyone was to make sure you survived. So he made another deal with founder Ymir."

Armin is deaf all those words. He shakes his head and pulls his face back. "That's not true." Armin mumbles, spitting the words angrily but too embarrassed to actually scream them. "If Eren could alter any part of it-- he could have gone back in time himself!"

"No, Eren could not go back in time himself because he was convinced he would do everything the same way." She says. "He believed you could do it, and you were the only one who could truly make a difference."

Eren's face flashed before his eyes. A moment that feels too far away marches before Armin's eyes. The sound of the beach invades his mind and Armin pulls back from Carla to cover his ears and shut his eyes. It does nothing to stop the memory from resurfacing.

Eren puts his weak hand on Armin's desperate hold. He's smirking, He's smirking like he has won the greatest battle of his life. "I knew-- knew you could do it. " he murmured, his smile spreading until his eyes closed. "You'll be free now..." Eren took a deep breath. And wasted it saying his final word: "Armin..."

Carla presses her mouth to a thin line. "So. He asked Ymir to replace your heart with his in exchange for taking Ymir's spot in the paths. He made sure you survived the age of titans, and in exchange he would do everything as the founder during that time. Hence..."

Armin's eyes widened. He takes a sharp breath and his brain puts all the pieces together. ``... Hence why he was always in the paths." Armin slowly finishes for her. His eyes slowly widen before he shuts them tightly. "It was... It was so OBVIOUS! How did I NOT SEE IT!!"

He jumps to his feet and walks around in circles as the puzzle in his head puts itself together. Armin pulls his hair out of his scalp. "He was always healing me back! And I once never questioned why Ymir would add something to our deal-- I'm so STUPID, I'm so stupid. I never questioned it! NOT ONCE!"

He stops, and lets his hair down. "Wait... Did you say..."

He turns around to face Carla again, cold dread chokes him and he struggles to say the next words. "Did you say he... He made founder Ymir put his heart in my chest?"

Carla doesn't say a word. She smiles bitterly and nods.

Armin's hands curl above his heart, gripping the fabric of his shirt. "All this time..." he gasps. "He didn't have a heartbeat and I... I did..."

"Take good care of it." Carla tells her. "It's the last thing we have of Eren." She looks at the ground. "The last time he came to see me... There was something in his eyes. He wasn't just my boy that way talking to me. He hugged me much tighter, as if he hadn't seen me in ages." she says. "And something tells me that version of my son missed me too much, almost as if I had died for him."

Armin bites his trembling lips.

"So I believe his story, and respect the choices he has made." she says. Carla walks over to Armin and her warm hands push his chin up until Armin has raised his head high. "Eren didn't completely disappear from our lives, a part of him is living right..." she points at Armin's chest, where Eren's heart is beating under his skin. "... *here*."

Armin shuts his eyes. "I-- I need time to process this."

"I don't know why he kept it to himself." Carla nods. "But I'll leave the choice to you to tell anyone or not."

She takes a step back.

"Whether you tell anyone else is your choice." she says as a matter of fact. "I will leave you now. Now that you know you carry Eren's heart, you might want to consider defending yourself and not letting them execute you..."

Shame grips his head and forces Armin to look down. How could he forget about that? Although it's too late to change the court's opinion...

After all, his executioner is right inside his bathroom.

An idea pops into his head, not knowing what else to do, Armin goes along with it.

Before Carla can leave, he takes the sleeve of her hand to stop her. "Carla..." he mumbles. "I... I need something." he whispers.

"Sure... Sure what is it?" she asks.

Armin swallows hard. "Can you cut my hair better?" he asks. "I tried my best but... It's not as good as it should be."

Carla offers a gentle smile. "Of course. Do you have any scissors?"

Armin nods.

As long as Carla is inside his room, Kenny will have to wait. He's smarter and more skilled than to let himself be discovered.

And Armin can't tell Carla the truth and risk her too. So he has exactly the time it takes for a haircut to think of an escape plan.

Armin sighs inwardly. Escaping from Kenny Ackermans claws might be his hardest challenge yet.

So how was it? Let me know in the comment. See y'all after my final exams. Hopefully, I won't be dead by then.

Please leave a KUDOS or a COMMENT to make the author happy!

Freedom

Chapter 34: Freedom

THIS IS THE END.... The next chapter is a small epilogue to wrap things up nicely.

You thought I was dead didn't you! Muahahahahaha! I'm alive!

This chapter is dedicated to @heyits.shine on tiktok who made a few videos for this fic! I actually did leave a comment under one but I don't think she understood it was me lol. Anyway, go check out their tiktok! <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJs2115w/> and <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJs2dUtJ/>

Anyway, enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Carla said nothing about the state of his uneven haircut but Armin can hear it from the look of pride on her eyes once she finishes.

She puts her hands on his shoulder and smiles at him through the window of the bathroom. "How is it?" she asks and Armin immediately nods.

"Thank you-- thank you so much... It... It looked so bad." Armin mumbles, trying his hardest to keep his voice even. Carla soothes him by a hand on his shoulder.

Armin pleads with her with his eyes. She does see it when his hand sneaks over the counter and pushes the scissors in his pocket. Carla doesn't mention it.

Armin smiles at her. "I will fix this. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have let it escalate in the first place."

Carla nods. "I know you can. Dina will pardon you very easily, I know it."

Armin only wishes it was that simple.

She asks if he needs anything else and he shakes his head. Uncharacteristically, Armin hugs the older woman very tightly. After a while, she returns the hug. Armin understands the way she leans down and rests her head against Armin's chest, enjoying the sound of her son's heartbeat.

Armin catches her biting back a sob.

She doesn't wait for Armin's response. She turns around, leaves the room, and knocks on the door, it opens and she steps out. The doors close with a bang that echoes in Armin's silent room.

With a heavy heart, Armin makes up his mind.

He pulls himself towards the door and knocks once again. If the startled sound from the other side is a clue, the guards are as shocked as he is. After a few seconds, Armin hears a guard say: "You are under house-arrest, we can not open this door."

Armin takes a deep breath. "I know..." he mumbles. He gathers himself to talk more clearly. "I need to talk to Queen Dina. Can you arrange that?"

He doesn't have much time until Kenny decides to step out of the place he was hiding.

"... The Queen? I'm afraid It's not allowed."

"Yes. that *is* allowed. I am still a part of her royal court and can ask for her presence, you'll have to tell her." Armin reminded them. "Don't challenge me, I've written these laws myself."

The open doors of the balcony let the wind in, and also make Kennys long coat float as he steps in once again. "They won't open the door." His voice sends chills down Armin's spine. Gone was the cold indifference. Eren's heart beat maddeningly in his chest from the adrenaline.

"Sorry, Young man." Kenny clicks his tongue. "Your fate was decided long before you changed your mind about living."

Armin slides down until he's kneeling on the floor. His eyes glued to the closed door. His chances are slim, but he better take them. Slowly, he asks: "the thing you said about being a slave to love. What did you mean..."

He moves, so he could look at Kenny.

The old man looks down at him. "Don't be an idiot. You wanna get me monologuing, huh? Everyone, is a slave to somethin'."

Armin tilts his head in confusion.

Kenny shakes his head with a disappointed chuckle. "And every time I saw you. You were fighting for others. Everythin' you did, you put yourself in the direct line of fire to stop your loved ones from burnin'." The next moment, Kennys hands raised to grip Armin's chin, forcing him to look up. Kennys harsh eyes met Armin's terrified ones. "Which left you in this pathetic state when he was gone." he clicks his tongue.

Armin puts his hand over the strong grip on his jaw. "Isn-- it -had better" He distracts the man by talking as his free hand sneaks into his pockets. "-han living in vain!?"

Kenny lets go of Armin's chin, and he starts to rub it. Armin grips the scissors tightly in his hand. "But you're right..." he whispers. "Sometimes you don't understand the value of something... Until you've almost lost it."

Armin can never hope to win against Kenny, but he can hope to outrun him. By being so close to the door, The guards will eventually intervene if they hear yelling from anyone other than Armin.

Armin grabs Kennys foot and he yelps. Kenny does spot it but it's late. Armin stabs his ankle once, and then Kenny screams. Armin runs back to the door. The moment Kenny puts weight on his injured foot, a string of curses leave his mouth and the doors burst open.

The guards rush to Kenny and the puddle of blood on his feet.

Armin runs.

He runs as fast as he can. The guards scream and follow him but Armin manages to run past the halls, one turn after another.

Until he meets the woman she had been searching for.

The guards point their blades at him, pushing Historia behind them. She stares at Armin with wide eyes. "Armin, what the hell?" she shouts. Carla isn't with her.

A smile spreads on Armin's lips. "Historia! I need to talk to you about-
_"

The words died in Armin's throat. As a shadow fell on his back and an overly familiar dagger pressed against his throat. Kenny presses it tightly, until it nicks his skin and Armin feels a cold track of blood run down his throat.

His eyes stare at Historia's, he can't hide the horror leaking into their eye contact.

"Look away princess." Kenny demands. "And pretend you never saw this."

"Kenny." she growls. "You're not to kill him. He has to be executed. *by law* . I order you to stop."

"Sorry, Princess. Your law has ordered me to do that." Kenny chuckles. "Now look around and pretend you didn't see anything."

Historia thinks for a moment. Heavy silence settles on them. Eventually, she closes her eyes and turns her back to Armin. Cold horror grabs Armin's neck, she is going to leave. His only way out is going to--

Armin shuts his eyes. "I didn't kill him!" he shouts before Kenny can convince her to turn a blind eye.

Historia stops.

Armin swallows hard. The cold pressure of the dagger on his neck makes it no easier to talk, but he continues. "I didn't kill Eren. And if I knew it would lead to his death, I would have never gone down this path."

Historia looks at him from the corner of her eyes. "At least you're acknowledging it." she scoffed.

"Eren told you a lot of his secrets, didn't he?" he replied immediately. "You know how devastatingly powerful founder Ymir could be."

Historia narrows her eyes dangerously. "What do you mean?" she asks, slowly and cautiously.

"Eren would have wanted you to know the whole story." he continues when Kenny pushes the dagger deeper into his throat. "I'm not kidding, it involves everyone who ever crossed paths with her in the paths. That includes *your child* ."

"That's enough, princess." Kenny says as a matter of fact. "Turn around, and pretend you never saw us."

"I bet you see it sometimes, don't you?" a smirk runs down Armin's face. "You're of royal blood. You have ought to have seen *some* memories that confused you."

Historia's eyes turn from Armin's to Kennys. "Release him."

"What?"

"I said, *release* him." Historia says sharply. She turns to one of her guards. "I want an audience with the queen. Tell her it's urgent."

"But-- but her majesty--"

"Audience with the queen." Historia repeats. "Now." Historia's head turns to Armin. "Lets see what sort of mental gymnastics are you going to perform this time, *master manipulator*. " she growls.

Deep down, Armin knows he has won. The moment Kenny reluctantly lets go of his neck, he can already feel the gentle touch of free wind on his face.

Historia's guards take him roughly. They push him forward but as long as it is in the direction of Dinas office, he doesn't protest.

To his surprise, Historia sits right next to Dina behind the round table in the queens office, a cup of untouched warm tea infront of her.

Dina has her hands laced in front of her, her stormy gray eyes glare daggers at him, and welcome him at the same time.

A servant pours tea for a third party. Armin can only assume it's for him. With a wave of her hand, All guards and servants leave the Queens office, slamming the door shut in an uncomfortable and long silence.

Silence that Armin can easily keep.

Dina says nothing, with the stunt Armin pulled in the court, she knows that he knew about her assassination plan. No words will be left after that.

Armin tilts his head and stares at Historia, his supposed savior crosses her arms over her chest. "I'm not going anywhere." Historia says as a matter of fact, her voice sounds loud and demanding. "Now, Spill."

"Direct force never worked with Armin, here." Dina admits with a sigh. She points at the tea on her left. "Sit down. The tea is getting cold."

"I..."

"I'm not giving you coffee, you look as sleep deprived as it is." Dina says with a chuckle.

"Considering you were going to put me to my eternal rest--"

Historia narrows her eyes. "I still can't believe it. Seriously? This isn't the kind of justice Eren deserves." She demands.

"There might not be any crime to enforce justice for, my dear." Dina reminds her. "I was saving our poor reputation. Don't pout. I know you agree with me. That's the entire reason why Armin is standing in front of us, right now."

Armin feels invisible. He wonders how long it will take. How long has Armin had to leave to make the relationship between the Queen and her heir so professional and tight, to the point that *he* is the outsider.

"But I am curious, what made you bring him here?" Dina asks.

"The dreams." Historia says shortly. "He mentioned them."

Dina's eyes widened. "The... Dreams?"

"Yes, *those dreams* . The ones with the rumblings and earthquakes and my daughter looking nothing like my daughter." Historia mumbles. "The ones that started after I shook his hand last time we met."

Armin's jaw drops. It all had been a far fetch. A guess. He didn't know it held any truth to them. He just assumed that if Eren had known about the other timeline, one physical touch would transfer some unpleasant memories.

And of course... By some stroke of luck... It was true.

Poor Historia... She must have been so confused.

Dina takes a deep breath. Finally, she had the conversation at Armin. "It's been a while since we had an actual conversation, Armin." she says. She nods her head towards the tea cup on the table. "It's been more than a year. Ah! How the tables turn... You used to be my most trusted advisor." she wonders outloud.

Armin sits on his spot silently. He doesn't touch his tea.

"But I'm afraid my patience has grown thin. So explain yourself thoroughly." she says as a matter of fact. She takes a casual sip of her tea. "Thoroughly." she repeated for emphasis. "And start with why Eren passed away. You have half an hour only before I make up my mind."

"Half an hour?" Armin tilts his head. "Then what?" he paused. "You'll torture me?" he added hesitantly before a mad smirk rose to his lips. "I've already been through Marleyan torture, I'll add the paradisian one to the collection--"

Dina shook her head in disappointment. "You underestimate my abilities. Even without the founder's power, I am the queen of paradise. Owner of all that's in this land including..." she sighs. "... Your personal journals. Even if you'd written them in code, How long would it take for me to decipher them? A year? Two? I've already started."

Armin narrows his eyes with a challenge. *good luck* .

"So... Make it easy on all of us. Explain yourself." she leans back, watching Armin with thoughtful eyes.

Armin takes a deep breath. A part of Armin wants to not tell her, let her confusion take the better of her and--

Armin shakes his head. No. A confused Dina means an Angry Dina. An Angry Dina will never spare Armin's life.

"I'm going to tell you that and more." Armin promises. "I'm going to tell you what you've always been asking me." Armin laughs. "Damn-- I was so determined to take these with me to the grave but-- I guess life does change us."

Dina hums. "Go on."

"I did not kill Eren. Eren sacrificed himself to save me." Armin explains. "Although I look almost 20. I've actually lived it for thirty years. That's because when I was 19, I made a deal with Ymir Fritz to go back in time and change the past, giving her my heart and her freedom in exchange."

Historia's face grows crooked with a frown. "What?" she snaps. "That can't be right... Right? Time travel!?"

Armin looks dead in her eyes. "You made a child from yourself and Ymir with the power of the founder." Armin reminds her. "Something impossible. You of all people should know the true power of the paths."

"Explain from the beginning." Dina demands and Armin doesn't plan to waste time any longer.

"When I was ten. The colossal attacked Shiganshina much like in this timeline. The titans stormed in and..." Armin looks at Dina. "You ate Eren's mom. You killed Carla."

Dina blinks in surprise.

"We escaped but they sent a large number of people back to the titan lands to help fight famine. My grandfather was among them. Then...

... So... I thought it was the last day of my life so... So I decided to walk along the beach. See how long I can walk. Eren followed quickly behind me."

Historia's has been fighting back emotional remarks ever since he told them Ymir's fate in the other timeline. Dina watches dumbstruck.

And Armin...

Armin tries to blink away the tears as he explains the last moments he felt Eren's warmth. "I saw Ymir..." he says. "I wasn't ready to die, but... But If I'd known I would have jumped in her arms if it meant Eren was here- here, telling this-this tale instead of me."

Armin blinked the offending tears away, which forced him to stop talking.

A heavy silence settles between the three of them. Historia is still processing the information while Dina looks utterly disgusted.

It's Historia who dares to break the silence with a chuckle. She crosses her arms over her chest and relaxes back. "That explains all the unprovoked beef you had with me all this time." she mumbles. "So... They were true, after all."

Dina looks at her from the corner of her eyes. "Does it check out what you've been dreaming about?"

Historia closes her eyes. "As long as you consider dreams to be reliable... Yes. It checks out. The rumbling, the big skeleton titan... The daughter and my old friend." Historia nods slowly, once again.

Dina stares at Armin once more. "Let me summarize." Dina says, She rubs her temples and closes her eyes, no doubt rubbing away a headache. "So you mean the Rumbling was completed--"

"Yes." Armin says immediately.

"And Eren--"

"Yes."

Dina takes a sharp breath. "And Historia just went along with it--"

Armin looks at the princess from the corner of his eyes. "Yes." he says with extra emphasis which makes Historia roll her eyes.

Dina takes a deep breath to calm herself down. "Damn it. Couldn't you have titans blood or something? time travel?" she growls. "I always knew something was wrong with you-- but this?!? Damn it. That also explains why your eyes were purple." Dina shakes her head.

Armin tilts his head. "I don't understand." he asks, expecting her to answer.

Dina waves her hand dismissively. "Eren was always in the paths. When the founder is connected to the paths he has purple eyes or the 'heart of the founder'. But *you* had his heart. This connection to the paths slowly turned your eyes purple." Dina clears her throat. "And now you don't have that connection anymore, your eyes are normal. I have to say, "Blue suits you better."

Dina stands up and holds a hand up to tell them to stay where they were. "You two can continue bickering about what-ifs." she says. "Stay here, and don't leave this room. I'll come back shortly."

When she leaves, Armin immediately turns to Historia. "You're taking this... Way better than I thought."

Historia rolls her eyes, almost angrily. "What's there to take badly?" she laughs "all this time... You're just mad Eren agreed more with me than he did with you." Historia scoffs. "And from what you explained, it was for good reason."

Armin glares at her angrily, gritting his teeth. "What sort of *good reason* ends up in all our friends' deaths?"

"The sort that doesn't end in 5 thousand casualties and the south completely destroyed." Historia shoots back.

Armin slumps back, and lets the awkward silence take over.

However, it doesn't last long. Historia muttered something under breath and pulled the stray hair strands away from her face.

"Armin... You said something about my child." he says, breaking the silence.

At that moment, Armin feels a bucket of ice splash on his face. Cautiously, he nods. "Yes...?"

Historia's eyebrows twitch, from anger or other emotions, Armin doesn't know. "I had a dream once." she says as a matter of fact, eyes tightly shut. "The night after Eren left to find you... And the last time I saw him. Now I think that dream must have been a memory."

"A memory..." Armin repeats.

"I was in the castle." Historia whispers. "A man that looked alot like my childhood bully was moving around a bundle. It's... It's gone isn't it?"

Armin opens his mouth to say something, he instead opts to nod slowly. "Ymir is... Probably the same person as... Uh... Your current daughter." he says, after he realized he doesn't know what Historia's child was named.

Historia sighs. "I..." she whispers. "You did a good job with this timeline. Eren would be proud... Both of them would be proud."

Dina storms back in before Armin can understand the gravity of her words. Dina walks over and slams a piece of paper in front of Armin.

"What is this?"

Dina sighs loudly. "Non Disclosure agreement." she says as a matter of fact. "From now on, everything regarding the other timeline is a government level secret, to be revealed only a 100 year time frame."

"... Why 100 years from now?" Armin asks curiously.

"The dead don't regret, Armin." She rolls her eyes. "Even if some mentally unstable person believes this time travel nonsense, we're all too dead to care. That's Historia's grandchildren's problem."

Dina shoves a pen into Armin's hands. "Sign it, Armin. I'm not in the mood for an argument."

Armin arches an eyebrow, but he can't argue with the queen of paradise.

Armin takes a deep breath before he starts talking. He doubts covering lies with more lies is a good idea but it's what Dina believes. Armin is too tired to deal with more politics than necessary, so he keeps his head high and says: "No one killed Eren."

No whispers follow, unlike what he expected. The jury and Historia's representative listen very closely, so Armin continues. "Eren died because of an unforeseen consequence of the power of the titans vanishing." He nods again. "I didn't kill him. I didn't know he was even injured. When he started bleeding... I tried to stop it... but all that blood ended up on me instead."

Armin looks at Carla from the corner of his eyes. "I felt immense guilt from his death after I connected the dots. If we hadn't been traveling, he probably would have been saved in a hospital somewhere."

Armin lowers his head, biting back the bile rising in his throat. "But now I see... I wanted to tell the truth."

Armin turns to the doctor that was previously Historia's witness. "Now that I hear what you said, I think it all makes sense."

Dina pushes her glasses up and looks at Historia. "Dr Denise, do you have any new input in the matter."

The doctor stands up. "My new report is given to the jury. Personally, I don't believe Mr Arlert is lying. The reports were handed before the jury were told to rethink their verdict."

Dina presses her mouth to an angry thin line. "Alright..." she trails off, again forgetting what she actually has to say. The jury's representative gets the queue.

"We find the defendant, Armin Arlert, innocent of the charge of first degree murder." they announce and Armin's shoulders slump down. He feels a hesitant smile rise to his face.

The court is filled with the sound of Dina's hammer against her table. "This case is dismissed." Dina says, finally. "The charges against Armin Arlert are meaningless and demeaning to someone who gave his all to the Eldian race."

With the wave of her hand, the guards move to him. The chains and handcuffs come undone. Armin's joints ache but he eventually stands up, rubbing his sore wrists away.

The moment Armin can stand up to his feet, he feels strong hands take him into an embrace. Slowly, Armin lifts his hands and hugs Mikasa back. Jean takes some time to walk to them, he puts a hand over Armin's shoulder and squeezes. Connie laughs and hits his back. "Congrats, man!" he says. "Almost thought we lost you there!!"

His eyes fell on Historia's. She nods, curtly and shortly.

Mikasa hugs him tighter.

Clarity strikes Armin's mind. If it had been the previous timeline, all of his friends would have been dead, Eren and himself rotting away with their titan.

And yet here he is...

Mikasa pulls back, smiling. For a brief moment, however hard it may have been, Armin allowed himself to smile in return as tears gathered in his eyes.

He owed this woman the world.

"Thank you..." he whispers. If she hasn't trusted him so blindly. Had she believed facts like everyone else had. Had she--

Armin bites his lips. "If you hadn't worked so hard I would have--"

--Would have killed the last piece of Eren in this world--

"*Thank you* ." he says louder. He hugs her as tightly as he can until the guards urge him to leave the courtroom.

He never lets her go until the guards lead him out of the courtroom.

"Armin!" Connie knocks on Armin's door. It's strange, with no guards to keep Armin inside, the hallway looks strangely empty.

Jean leans against his cane. "Maybe he's gone Already." he offers.

"Does he know about the party?"

"It's in his honor, of course he must!"

Jean sighs. "He probably doesn't. Here, we must find him before Mikasa gets worried again." He limps closer to the door and knocks again. With no answer, Jean opens the door.

They are met with an empty room.

Jean rubs the bridge of his nose, an angry exhale escapes his lips. "He's gone. We need to find him before this escalates into a political matter, *again* ."

Armin's feet ache.

He has walked all the way from Trost to Stohess. His feet ache and his ankles were sprained more than once.

He looks up at the sign of the shop he has been staring at for an hour.

Remi's tattoo shop is a clean place in the north of Stohess. He opens his shop at exactly midday and closes it at midnight. He's one of the cleanest tattoo shops in the area.

He doesn't want to get infections and other diseases, so he has spent the last month searching for a clean shop that follows safety protocols to a nail. He has found Remi's place.

Armin grabs the side of his elbow and hums thoughtfully. This is no time to step back. He takes a deep breath to soothe his nerves.

Mikasa and Jean must be searching the entire country for him. He left prison the moment he was freed, he fears the moment he'll see them again. They must know... Eren must have told them.

Armin needs this, needs this moment of being himself before he meets his friends again.

He summons all the courage he has left and steps inside the shop. His eyes search around until he sees a young man in his thirties cleaning his equipment.

The needles look...

They look...

Armin wets his lips. "I uh... I don't have money right now. Can I pay you back later if I put my soldiers ID on loan?"

The man pulls his shoulder length hair back, his hands are full of tattoos himself and his piercing blue eyes search Armin. He nods. "Depends on what tattoo you're getting..." he says.

Armin swallows hard. "It's a... It's a name... I want it near my heart." he explains as vaguely as he can.

The man's eyes suddenly softened. "You're a soldier eh? Is this your lover you've lost in war?" he asks.

Armin slowly nods, his eyes land to the ground and he sighs.

"It's free, mate. Get on the bed while I get the ink ready."

"Can you... Uhm... Write his name with his handwriting?" Armin murmurs. He offers a formal letter to the man with shaking hands, one that had Eren's signature on it. His hands shake, afraid it might disappear into thin air if he stops touching it.

It doesn't, the tattoo artist studies it carefully before nodding. "Yeah. It won't be the exact same but eh..." he takes a deep breath. "I'll get the best I can."

Armin watches the man from the corner of his eyes. He's curious about the mechanics of it all so he prefers to watch the man as he puts the needle of his device in place.

A long, sharp needle that goes into a black machine.

His hands shake.

Armin is running out of the shop before his mind recognises he's running.

He runs and runs and runs, from the streets to the back alleys, he runs until his feet aches and he accidentally sprains his leg and falls.

He hisses and grabs his ankle, cursing under his breath from the pain.

Slowly, an old lady approaches him with a kind but questioning smile. "Are you alright, young man?"

Armin nods frantically.

Utter fear had filled his being when he saw the needle. Even now, his body screams to run and get away. The sudden realization hits him that perhaps, needle were a part of the torture he doesn't quite remember.

Armin has to lean against the wall to keep standing. His chest starts to heave and his body slides down until he's sitting on the ground. His eyes see nothing although they are wide open.

His mind fails to understand where he is. He came to and failed to find a familiar spot to navigate from. He can't see the walls, nor any familiar building that could help find his location.

So, he asks a random passenger. "Uhm... Where am I?" he asks the clueless man.

He hums, an eyebrow raised at Armin's dumb question. "Are you drunk?" he asks, but answers anyway. "This is Johnson's street."

Johnson's street?

He blinks in surprise. He did spend a lot of time walking around Stohess, but never did he run across a *Johnsons street*.

He asks a boy dressed in all black if he knew the way. The boy nods happily. "Sure, what are you looking for?"

"Arlerts bookshop." Armin asked.

The boy rolls his eyes. "Arlerts bookshop is in *Arlerts street*, dummy." he laughs. "You must be new around here. Not used to those names, are you?"

Arlerts street?

what in the world?!?

The confusion is too much so Armin simply decides to go along with it. He asks around for a street supposedly in his name and, more surprisingly, people answer him with directions.

Never in a million years did Armin expect to actually find a sign.

A little black sign on a street light with white letters for the passers and walkers to see. Armin stares up at it for a few minutes. Long long minutes pass while Armin simply stares at the sign.

Oswin Arlert St.

In the memory of

The street itself was wider, completely reconstructed and different from what Armin remembers. He keeps walking until he stumbles upon a large sign, so different from what his grandfather had over his bookshop.

Arlerts bookshop and library.

He stares at the unfamiliar building for what feels like hours. He's blind to the passing of time until a gentle touch on his shoulder

makes him jump.

"Nice place, isn't it?"

Carla's soft voice pulls him from his thoughts. He takes a step back and turns his head to meet her eyes. "Well..." she asks. "Don't you want to go in? They asked my opinion for renovating the place in your absence but..." she shrugs. "I couldn't really help."

She steps forward and opens the door. A bell rings and it gets the attention of a woman sitting behind a counter. "Lady Carla!" she greets. "What can I do for you today?"

Armin follows after her with a nod of her head. Carla introduces Armin when he's too busy pondering on why the walls are the wrong color that he doesn't notice what the girls name was.

Happily, the girl shows him every detail of the new bookshop. He shows him the newspapers his grandfather had framed and the less rare books he kept hidden all around the room. What piqued Armin's interest was a ladder he never noticed before.

"The upper level is vacant." The librarian explains. "Apparently, it was supposed to be a home, but we can't touch it without the owner's approval." She clears her throat. "*your approval* ."

Armin points at his own chest. "my approval?"

"You're your granfathers only living relative. So everything in his name has been yours for a year now." Carla points out.

An idea sparks in Armin's mind. "I can move in here?" he asks immediately.

The color drained from the librarian's eyes. Armin understands she probably doesn't want to interrupt her peace.

(Wait... Does that mean Armin is her boss?)

"Legally yes." she says. "But it's completely empty! Why would you want to move in here?"

A smile spreads on Armin's face. "Everywhere I go is going to be completely empty." he mumbles. "And I don't want to stay in the palace anymore. I'm done with it."

"Forgive me for intruding, but I've always wanted to ask." the librarian smiles. "Where are they? Some of the most important parts of Mr Arlerts collection are missing. I looked everywhere... And I mean everywhere." she sighed.

Armin hums. "They're in good hands," he says. Falco's face comes into his mind.

Sometimes, he wonders what ambitions does Falco have for them. A deep dark part of him is glad the books remain out of the government's hands.

Armin is not used to parties.

Connie and Jean drag him into a bar in the richer part of stohess. Even Historia and Ymir show up with their royal guards.

The only part when Armin paid attention is when he is talking to Mikasa and Historia and he asks the question he wanted to hold to himself. "Jean, why do you keep up with your physiotherapy?" he asks, suddenly.

The question takes Jean by surprise. Mikasa opens her mouth to say something, but then she decides not to and lets Jean talk.

A few beats of silence later, Jean chuckles and puts his beer away. "I want to be back in action." he says as a matter of fact.

"But..." Armin clears his throat. "Isn't it better if you... Dont?"

Jean shakes his head. "Maybe. Maybe not. But when I woke up, I couldn't sit up straight without endless pain in my spine." He hit his cane to the ground a few times. "I'm going at least until I don't need this. Hange has offered my previous position back to me once I do... I wouldn't really need that much physical work anyway."

Armin never knew Jean's love for his work.

He wished he loved being in the scouts that much.

The rest of the night, Armin just nods at others' explanation about what happened during the year he was gone.

His ears hear none of it.

Dina had not held back.

Not even a paper was left of his personal diaries, journals, even his random doodles are gone. Armin is left with a barren room with only his clothes and some of his pens or pencils.

Eitherway, he starts packing. He does not want to stay in this room for one more minute. He has a lot to do. To buy. To arrange.

walls, how am I even going to move a mattress upstairs?

doesn't matter. One step at a time.

A forced cough gets his attention. He turns around and Historia is standing in the doorway, he had forgotten he left his door wide open.

"Oh... Uhm... Historia! Come in." he offers awkwardly, "I wanted to see you before I uh... Before I leave."

Historia nods, but she doesn't sit down. "Me too. I want to say goodbye on better terms than we started." she says.

Armin arches an eyebrow. "I'm not leaving forever. Who knows, Maybe I accept the offer to return to my old job as Dinas advisor." he points out.

Historia arches an eyebrow. "We both know you won't." She says as a matter of fact, and no matter how much he wanted to disagree, he knows this job is no longer as appealing as it was when he had catastrophes to prevent.

Historia clears her throat again and starts: "As you know... Ymir and I got married when you were gone." She plays with the wedding ring on her finger. "Eren was at the ceremony and... He confessed at some point he neglected almost all his responsibilities regarding you being an official consort."

Armin blinks in surprise. "Neglected?"

"Nothing serious. He didn't fill in some paperwork that would allow you access to royal jewelry, because he needed to show proof you would marry." she explains. "But... given how things are... I don't think it's fair. So... I wanted to give you this."

Armin noticed the box in her hand. It was a beautiful black box with golden lacings and the royal family's sigil on it. She offers the box to him and he opens it curiously, wondering what could be inside.

Inside, it's a golden ring with small blue sapphires. The attention to its detail is magnificent, each vine and leaf made with gold felt delicate but strong. Each sapphire represented a flower. Armin realized, with a pang in his heart, that the color of sapphires is his exact eye color.

(Eren remembered his true colors, even if the power of the titans made his eyes violet.)

Armin jaw drops. "I... I can't--"

"Eren had ordered it to stay untouched. I can only access it now because he's dead. It's obvious what he wanted to do with it." Historia points out.

"But... But what would I even do with it!?"

"It's yours... Do as you please." With that, Historia turns around and walks away.

Armin is too shocked to react for the first few minutes until he urgently puts the box between his clothes and runs after Historia.

He finds her with her daughter, walking to their room. She must have given it to a maid while they talked. She stops when she notices him, and raises an eyebrow as if asking *what do you want?*

Instead, Armin swallows his hesitation away. "I... I never officially met your daughter." he smiles awkwardly. "I don't even know what her name is nowadays."

Historia closes her eyes. "Ymir and I agreed to choose another name for her... Because of the circumstances."

Armin nods slowly.

Historia clears her throat. "Armin..." she whispers, her anger out and not hidden the slightest. "Meet my daughter, Erina."

Erina .

There is no doubt who they were honoring while naming her.

Although the subject of baby Ymir's parentage is something he never dared to think about in the other timeline, rumors still reached his ears that dragged his friends names through the mud. Looking at Erina, he wonders if they are the same baby or if his actions not only killed people but also wiped people out of existence.

Eitherway, something deep down in Armin knows this girl is going to have a much better life in this timeline than the previous one.

Armin laughs. He leans over to the ears and whispers: "You're welcome, you clueless ungrateful baby."

He mumbled incoherent noises as an answer.

Historia narrows her eyes. "I don't know why you'd say that."

"Believe me..." Armin whispers, he shakes all those disgusting rumors about Eren being Ymir's father away. In a conscious choice, Armin chose not to stain Historia's memory of Eren with that rumor. "... You really don't."

Within the first month of his freedom, Armin grew bored.

He refused to go back to the castle or enroll in the scouts. Both of them caused too much stress on his heart. His heart isn't his to put under such pressure after all.

He tried.

And boy did he try to find hobbies and careers to try. Jean's words and Carla's encouragement helped him push and try new things. Finance wasn't an issue. He got his pensions and allowances from the royal castle regularly, so there was no outside force at play. He helped Carla around the restaurant, which she genuinely appreciated. But Armin knew this wasn't what he wanted to do with the life Eren gifted him.

And yet...

One day, out of morbid curiosity, Armin decided to follow a group of high school graduates from their graduation ceremony from Carla's restaurant to the campus of Stohess royal university.

There were several sites where people explained different careers and specialties that paradise needed and was taught in the university of Stohess. One of which got Armin's attention.

His name had made a reputation for itself, so when he requested to see the principal, he was let in.

The man was elderly very close to death, but his eyes held youth and wisdom like Armin had never seen. He welcomed Armin into his office and offered freshly brewed tea. He asked if Armin enjoyed the career festival, which Armin nods to. "Yes, I actually did see most of it." Armin hums. "It's a good place to start looking for new careers."

"Certainly." the principal nods. "But... I have to ask. What brings you here, sir?"

Armin clears his throat. "I'm looking for a change in career." he says as a matter of fact. "Please explain why I would spend four years on a degree."

The principal blinked in surprise. "Ah it's always nice to see young souls seeking knowledge. However, are you aware of the challenges in your path?."

"Humor me." he insisted. "Maybe it's worth your time. I was a certified genius in the military after all."

The principal smiles knowingly. "Very well, here in the royal university of Stohess we offer bachelor degrees in many subjects. Which course interests you?"

"The study of oceans." Armin offered. "Oceanology, was it?"

"We have marine biology and geology in the department of science," he said. "Both of which we offer full ride scholarships for those with overall THS grades."

"THS?"

"Totality of highschool. Surely you must be familiar with it, it was your idea to revolutionize the education system." he said. "Its seven grades are tests of Geology, Biology, Maths, Chemistry, Physics, History, and literature. All of which are taken in the final year of highschool"

Armin certainly did not remember initiating that.

He had just pointed out the faults of paradise's education systems and the lack of specialized talent. This is all probably done by Dinas orders, not his, as every soul seems to think.

"I have military training, is there any way I can convert these grades to TSH?"

"I'm afraid not." the principal said. "But the time of the tests is near! They are held in the last week of summer and last week of winter, which is next week! I urge you to try and sign up for our courses with the results."

Armin thought about it for a moment, he thanked the principal and rushed back home.

18 year olds do it every year, how hard can it be?

He asked the librarian, and surprisingly, they had the standardized version of the public school books.

Armin confidentially skimmed them once, and was surprised at the absurd easiness of it. Within the next three weeks, the total exams will take place within one day of each other and hopefully, Armin will get decent enough grades.

The next week, Mikasa comes home for a few days of break to find Carla gently comforting Armin, who is rocking back and forth. He exchanges a look with Jean. Who shakes his head, not knowing what's wrong.

"What's made you so depressed all of a sudden?" Mikasa asks, sitting down in front of Armin.

Armin doesn't raise his head from the table, he simply slides the letter to Mikasa and groans in annoyance. Mikasa takes the letter and opens it. To her surprise, it's Armin's report card.

He failed literature and History, making him eligible for Paradies universities.

Failed .

Mikasa bursts into laughter.

"I can't believe this." she whispers, wiping a happy tear from her eyes. "Oh walls. This is hilarious."

Armin raises his head from the table to glare at her. "Ha Ha, Mikasa." he mocks. "It's been five years since I touched a story book, of course I would fail."

"Sorry... Sorry I'm just--" Mikasa stutters. "Did you really *fail* ?"

Carla shoots an angry glare at her direction and she slowly closes her mouth.

Jean is no better. He blinks at Armin's head in surprise and licks his lips a few times to think of something to say, and finds none.

"It's ok, I'll try again in summer." Armin says as a matter of fact. "I will get those stupid grades no matter what."

His promise hangs in the air, and no one makes a joke of it.

Armin studies day and night.

Many times did he find himself over a thick book of problems to solve with a burning candle illuminating the room he was in.

Sometimes, when he stays over at Carlas, he wakes up with a blanket over his body. Carlas never ending acts of kindness makes Armin think about how she wishes Eren was here, instead of him.

Equations and Historical tales occuiipy so much of his mind that he thinks not about winter or summer or fall or the fun he had he had with Eren just last year or the torture he couldn't quite remember two years ago.

All in all, it's a worthy distraction.

He aced six of the seven tests. The last one, which was History, falls on the third day of fall. To Mikasa and Carla's relief, Armin wakes up that day and has a smile on his face.

"What?" he asks over the breakfast table in Carla's restaurant. Mikasa sends him a curious look.

"Nothing." she whispers, a knowing smile on her face. "How do you feel about your last test today?"

Armin shrugs. Although his estimates aren't definite, he's sure he will get full marks on the science courses, his literature will lower his score and History... Well...

(With an average of 80 percent, he knew he was in the top percentile and would be accepted into the full rise scholarships the principal talked about. They had to, apparently, Armin ranked 65th. A little number on top of his report card that assured him only 64 people managed to get better grades than him in the TSH tests, which was somewhat reassuring.)

He wanted to come back home right after the exam but Instead, Armin started constructing other plans.

He smiled at her and Carla. "I actually... Have some plans for after the test."

"Really?"

"Yes." he nods at Carla. "Thank you for your help, Carla. I would have never managed to take these exams without you."

Carla answers him with a reassuring smile.

(To Armin's amusement, he had to write his own name down for the answer twice.)

When his test finishes, Armin genuinely wants to sit on the corner of the street and just breathe. Not even his three years of cadette years were so heavy on his shoulders. He felt as if he was running blind to a destination he wasn't quite sure existed.

However, Armin had somewhere to be, and he found it an hour after his test finished.

Armin pushes his hands into his pockets.

Every single nerve on his body told him not to. He'd never been a fan of tattoos and what guarantee does he have that he won't run away with his tail between his legs like last time?

He should be going home. He got what he wanted. Now it's time to go home and relax after an intense six months of studying.

Instead, Armin walks in the tattoo shop and meets the tattoo artist after six months.

The heavily tattooed man recognises him. He smirks and points at a table on the other side of the shop. "Your ID is still there," he laughs.

Armin blinks in surprise. He had... Completely forgot about it.

"I brought money this time," he jokes. "So... Do you still have the letter?"

"I have to look for it. But I'm pretty sure I put it next to your ID. Are you sure you won't run away this time?"

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line and nods.

"Alright." the artist points at a bed. "Go sit there and choose where you want it. And Please, get used to the idea that I'm gonna use a needle, mate."

Armin takes a sharp breath, and nods.

There is a mirror next to the bed. Armin takes a deep breath, he forces his muscles to relax and looks up at the ceiling. He takes off his shirt and lays back. "I can take it..." he says, touching the naked and clear skin for the last time.

The artist comes back with Eren's handwriting and prepares his equipment leisurely slowly. Armin highly suspects it is to give Armin time to run away.

He shuts his eyes and looks away.

The needle stings.

Armin flinches away and it results in a long bloodied black line across his chest.

He steadies himself back on the bed and mutters endless apologies. The artist just rubs the bridge of his nose and allows Armin to relax. "Whenever you're ready, mate," he says.

Armin forces his body to still and nods.

It takes a ridiculously long time. Armin bit his lips bloody raw. After a long long time, the artist *finally* leaned back and put his device away. "Done."

Armin immediately sits up.

To his surprise, the tattoo is bleeding and has a tissue over it. The artist pushes him back down and applies a sort of cream to clean it. Once that is over, he allows him to see it in the mirror.

He looks at the mirror...

His fingers touch the ink under his skin. He swallows the lump in his throat, the skin of his collarbone has swelled and became an angry red. It hurts to touch but what matters is that the name is exactly like he wants it to be.

Eren

A gentle smile appears on his lips.

It's not before the artist has offered him a tissue that he realizes his eyes have teared up.

Although the entire family walked on eggshells around him, Armin knew what day it was.

He knew, he knew since the beginning, that his History exam would fall on the dreaded third day of fall even when Mikasa discarded all the calendars in his small home and Carla refused to speak about it.

Armin knows.

Although hours are left until sunset, Armin feels the dread rising to his mind again. What will happen when the sun sets? It's been a year, it's been a year since what was supposed to be Armin's death date.

But Today is a day with a clear sky and the warmth of the sun shines on his exhausted body.

He is in the open, and saltwater air from the ocean blows in his face. Armin sits back and his hands bury into the warm sand. His eyes

stare at the ocean. Its blue color soothes his eyes and the sand under his body calms his raging heart.

The waves come up until they are wetting Armin's bloody and muddy clothes.

Armin stares at the view for a few more seconds before letting his mind drown in the reality that this is real.

He is real, he's survived thanks to his loved ones and the chance of life under his fingertips is solid and exists like everyone else's. He is in the ocean, where he lost everything a year ago and soon, he will be gone in an adventure he knows next to nothing about.

Armin looks up, the bright sun makes it impossible to keep his eyes wide open but he can see a white bird pass by.

A little feather, small and impossibly white, falls from the free bird and dances down towards where Armin is sitting. It floats in front of him. The feather touches his fingers for a moment before the wind blows it away.

Armin smiles. "I know..." he whispers to himself and a certain brown haired man who Armin knows is listening. His hand clutches above his rapidly beating heartbeat. "... I think this'll be an exciting journey."

I guess I'll just talk to you guys about certain plot points and reasons why!

Why some people died:

*Berthold: the two reasons for the first untimely death in this fic is 1. to show Armin's goals, plans and priorities. And that although it causes him great pain, he will see through it. 2. The warriors won't just back off if Armin asked them to.

*Annie: To show the butterfly effect and solidify the concept of consequences to Armin's actions (the worst emotional way possible)... And to bring Dina into the story.

*Hange squad and Gunther: to show Annie and Reiner's attack wasn't without causality.

*Olou: To prove Dina cares more about Zeke than he does about random Eldian soldiers.

*Miche squad: to show Ymir will be ruthless in her control over Armin's surroundings. That she can put him to sleep/mess with his plans whenever she so desires.

*Erwin: Because I needed the chaos caused by his absence.

*Sasha Braus, Marco Bott and Oswin Arlert: all three were killed off to make the theme darker and show the depth of Marley's attack. Their death served as a reminder to Armin of how serious the situation was and what Eren prevented in that timeline.

((Fun fact: in the earliest concept of the story, Jean was supposed to be the one who found out Reiner was the armored titan and die instead of Marco. The point was to show the butterfly effect of Armin's choices. I thought it would be interesting to switch their places.))

And at last...

Eren: because that boy will never sit back and let Armin die. But the actual point was to give truth to what Ymir said at the beginning, that not everything can be changed and Armin isn't the one deciding the timeline.

Brought back to life:

*Carla: a part of Armins plan to save Eren from the rumbling. It'll be proven to be pointless.

*Armins grandpa/Owsin Arlert: to give Armin an attachment to paradise. What I hated THE MOST about the characters in the rumbling arc is that almost no one(other than Jean) had living family in paradise(lets exclude Connies mom, she wasn't exactly human at the time Connie decided to stop the rumbling). betraying your island is easy when none of your loved ones live there. The old mans pressence complicated things further down the road because Armin wouldn't be able to gamble so freely on paradise future when his own grandpas life depends on it. His death gives meaning to Armins quest for peace and shows the unseen consequences of his more passifistic/manipulatice ways.

Dina: the seemingly powerful queen of paradise whom Armin could use to imply the changes he wants to. I needed Paradise to have a little more confidence in its own. And if Eren ever where to betray them to start the rumbling, it would mean so much more to betray an actual reigning monarch rather than Historia who didn't take much of a queenly manner even before pregnancy. Her attitude changes later on and takes more role of a dictator after Zekes death. This was kinda personal and I had to omit a huge part related to this-- but her part was to show even great monarchs have an expiration date.

Marco: to show more of the (future) rift between paradises soldiers and internal conflict since he's an MP. And to provide living proof that Armins plan is changing things.

Don't forget to kudos and comment!

Here just to remind y'all about the tiktoks. I looovveee long comments, short comments, drawings, tiktok, anything that people make really.

Anyway, love y'all

Epilogue

Chapter 35: Epilogue

And now... We have reached the last time I will update this fanfic.

Most my last fanfic. Life goes on I guess. I haven't started a new draft for a fic in weeks now, so I doubt I'll write a new fic anymore. I guess life really does move on.

Anyway, here is an epilogue! Thank you everyone who read and kudosed and commented and bookmarked. Every little interaction makes me smile. Thank you everyone, and I wish you all have a great day/night and time in general

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Year 1023.

Armin liked group projects.

No, he really did. He especially liked it when his teammates let him down and allowed him to do all the work. It gave him the chance he needed to do what *he* believed was right without interference.

So he simply rests his head against his fist when Mr Shadis, the history teacher, announces the newest project. "You will work on the controversial subjects of paradise's history. I want your group to take a side and present valuable information and strong evidence to your claim. Then, you'll have 15 minutes to present and 30 minutes to debate with your classmates."

Armin grins. He can already see a huge A+ on his report card.

The teacher announces the teams and the subjects one by one.
"John, Maria, Gaelle, you three will work on the first king of the walls. Whether you agree with his approach to ending the Eldian dynasty or not."

"Lysa, Freddie, Hanna. You three will work on the conquest of Marley."

A loud "damn it" echoes in the class. Armin wonders why. All subjects sounded nice to him and he can already list a long list of great arguments to defend why king Fritz did that, or why the conquest of Marley was necessary due to water shortages and quick increase in Eldian population.

One by one, the subjects are announced, but Armin's hasn't. Until the last one. Mr Shadis looks up and stares right into Armin's eyes. "Armin, you will work on your namesake, Armin Arlert. And whether or not he truly had time travels or experienced a different timeline."

Armin blinked in surprise. So he's doing this alone? Good.

"And your partner will be the new student... Eren Magnolia."

The happy smile cracked. Armin turns back and takes a good long look at his new teammate. Eren looked normal, he always came to school with the same pale green shirt and black coat. He looked as if he did minimum physical activity, Eren stared back at him, he smiled awkwardly.

Armin pushes his glasses up and hums.

I'll just do it on my own.

He truly expects Eren not to show up at the library. He does.

And he comes with his laptop, history books, and everything they need to make this presentation. Armin is impressed.

"Do you think Shadis thinks this is funny?" is the first thing Eren says before he sits down. "Putting an *Eren* and an *Armin* on a group for this?"

"Ah. So you're not completely clueless about the subject." Armin muttered.

Eren shrugged. "Meh. My name is Eren. I tried to find out as much as I could about Eren Yeager... So..."

Armin rolled his eyes. "Amazing. Have you read the book?"

"I have read a lot of books."

"I mean *the* book. The supposed collection of diaries and the retelling of Armin Arlerts life."

"Oh, you mean "*Deal with the devil* "? Yes I have."

Armin took a deep breath. "Good. So we have common grounds. Let's start by picking a side. Obviously..." Armin whispered. He said:"Armin Arlert was not a time traveler" at the same time Eren said:"he had traveled back in time."

Both froze. They stare at each for a full minute before Eren narrows his eyes. "He did."

Armin grinded his teeth. "He did not!"

"He did! It's *obvious* ! Everything written in his notes about traveling back in time aligns with historical records!"

"That entire book is fiction. Armin Arlert could not have traveled back in time."

Perfect. Armin wants to slap himself. Now he has to spend half their precious time convincing Eren, then the next half convincing his other classmates. *Why do I have to have a teammate!?!?*

Armin cleared his throat. "Let's be honest, Eren. It's probably just a rumor the people made to justify how smart he was."

"Every history book I read complimented Arlerts predictions. Not to mention-- his records of the previous timeline greatly resemble those that happened in ours. It's like that in every book I read."

"Then you have the literacy power of a five year old!" Armin sighs. "I don't know why they made that fictional story up. Maybe, Maybe, it was all a ploy to ruin Arlerts name? Maybe it was something people made to make themselves feel better about how stupid they felt in front of Arlert."

Eren searched through his bag and pulled a hardcover book with "Deal with the devil" written over it. He held up the book. "It is written here-- very very clearly-- how Armin Arlert was thrown back in time." he said in his defense.

Armin grinded his teeth again. "Yes, a fictional story."

"It's not fictional, it's Armin Arlerts notes and diaries."

"Notes and diaries that were found 3-hundred thousand miles away from where he died?"

"It's not the storage keepers fault he migrated to the other side of the world for his work."

"Why wouldn't a man as smart and private as him NOT take such delicate notes. they're just the product of a conspiracy theorist with a hand writing similar to Arlerts."

"Maybe because Arlert wanted to leave his past as a man if politics behind to work in marine fields." Eren shrugs. "I mean-- we have his published books about tectonic plates, and he was working on a few radical ideas about ocean pollution at the end of his life. Why would he keep his notes about fighting titans near him when he's working on a different subject?"

"Alright... Alright... Then why would his notes be revealed 110 years after this time travel supposedly happened?"

"Duh, probably the monarchs didn't want to risk it?"

"To risk everyone knowing they have time traveled? That makes no sense."

"Oh please, the Reiss royal family never makes any sense. They should be abolished already." Eren huffed. "They're idiots. Even the ones not currently in the royal family are idiots."

Eren shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I believe he did time travel. You believe he didn't. What should we do now?"

Armin smiled from ear to ear. "Easy, let's go and prepare. 48 hours from now. Let's meet here again and talk. However, the debate gets to choose our stance in this presentation."

"What is this? Some sort of anime fight?"

"Precisely yes." Armin stands up. He pushes his glasses up and stares at Eren like he means business. "See you in 48 hours. Right in this spot."

And exactly 48 hours later, they met at the exact same table in the same library.

Armin is ready. He opens his powerpoint and starts, Eren listens as if he's all ears.

Armin grins. This is going to be easy. "Alright, argument number one on why Armin Arlert is not necessarily a time traveler." he says, and slams his hands to the table. "Number one, Arlert was a certified genius and the people he was up against were significantly dumber. He could predict what they wanted to do. For example, Reiner Braun confessed he was the armored titan, and there were numerous

counts of Berthold Hoover and Annie Leander acting strange. He just had his eyes open."

Eren pressed his mouth to a thin line.

Armin went to the next slide, where he has a screenshot of Armin Arlert's public files. Then, came the next slide. "Argument two, the only source that states Armin Arlert was a time traveler is a book called "Deal with the Devil" that its events were never confirmed by any of Arlert's loved ones."

"They were all dead." Eren rolled his eyes. "The only people who knew him by the time the book was published were his students in the Western University of Marine Biology, on the other side of the world." Eren taps his pen against his hand. "And-- Sasha Kirstein has made a lot of comments about her parents in that book. Positive ones."

"Correct, but her comments were about her parents-- not the time travel aspect."

Eren grins. "And that's where you're wrong! Sasha Kirstein and Eren Kirstein both mentioned how their grandmother, Carla, often talked about his son's sacrifice and a chance to redo things. These comments were made 30 years before a Deal with the Devil was published. You'd think if someone knows the truth about Eren Yeager's death it is his mother."

Armin narrowed his eyes. "Let me finish."

Eren held his hands up and stayed silent.

"Argument three, That book was published from Armin Arlert's alleged notes, and Paradisian propaganda is known for editing what doesn't suit them." Armin cleared his throat. "There is an argument that Queen Historia destroyed some parts of the story-- but why would she? She gained nothing from destroying those parts of the

story unless-- unless this book is also another part of paradises propaganda to revive titan history."

"Can I talk?"

"No."

Armin then skipped to the next slide. "And finally, there are parts of the previous timeline that do not make sense." Armin hums. "You see, it is claimed in the book that the entire walls were turned into titans and marched the world in less than two days, destroying everything-- modern stimulations today show wall titans would evaporate in deserts and slow down in waters, making Arlerts' claim impossible."

"That's not true!"

"That's not even the beginning of it." Armin narrowed his eyes. "It is claimed that Eren Yeager did the rumbling in the other timeline, while we know Zeke Yeager wanted to go on with his euthanasia plan. And the founder favors the one with royal blood-- meaning the rumbling itself was impossible to happen."

"That's not true."

Armin rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Oh please. What can make Ymir Fritz stop doing what she had been doing for two thousand years!"

"Freedom!"

"Freedom?"

"Yes, freedom!" Eren said. "Eren Yeager had convinced her that he could free him. That he could free her from being a slave!"

Armin slumped down on his chair. "Oh great walls, there is no reasoning with you." he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Well, what do you have for us, Mr freedom?"

Eren coughs to clear his throat. "Well, I have two timelines."

"Timelines?"

Eren opens a rolled paper and spreads it all over the table. "Yes, two timelines. They will prove Armin has lived this life twice."

Eren starts from the beginning. "Here, we have the fall of Shiganshina. In the previous timeline Eren Yeager's mother dies under rubble but oh-- Armin Arlert is there to save her in our timeline."

"That's a coincidence."

Eren moves on. "Armin Arlert is shot and is believed to be dead, but oh- he wakes up!" Eren acts surprised. "Then, we have the colossal attack on Trost by Berthold Hoover and oh-- in the new timeline Hoover mysteriously dies."

Armin smacks himself.

"And don't start with 'there is no proof' nonsense, Marley's records show he was indeed the colossal titan-- something no one else could have known." Eren smiles. "Alright, let's move on. Annie Leonhardt was supposed to attack the scouts and kill Levi's squad and oh-- Arlert steps in again."

Eren trails his hands down. "And it goes on and on and on. Arlert knew things no one had foreseen. No amount of genius can explain all these coincidences."

"He was a certified genius! Of course he knew!"

"Alright-- Alright-- how do you explain this!?" Eren whispers and points his finger at the end of the timeline where he has written Arlert's age when he died. "His family was plagued with heart diseases and yet he lived to 105 years old with no reported heart diseases--"

"Yeah, he lived on the brink of modern science. It's not all that uncommon to find Eldians well into their 100s from his generation."

"He outlived the freaking Queen Historia II... and Queen Erina! Somehow you mean he lived a healthier and more carefree life than the queens of paradise?"

"That still doesn't mean his heart was Eren Yeagers."

"Really?" Eren huffs angrily. "It's a report. Literally. After his autopsy, the DNA for Armin Arlerts heart did not match the rest of him."

Armin narrows his eyes. "Yeah, because trusting the DNA result of a 100-year-old corpse is a valid result."

Their debate went on and on, until the librarian came towards them and hissed until their voices calmed down.

Unfortunately, this project had too much of an impact on Armin's grade and it was too much for him to ignore.

And Eren refused to back down.

They kept arguing day and night. At some point, to his horror, Armin started looking forward to Eren's notification. In between talks, they slowly got to know each other before diving back towards their original argument.

Eren told him he had two older siblings, one of which was distantly related to current king Reiss. He joked about his half-brother being the 150th in the line for the throne, and pushed back every second.

In return, Armin told him his mother was a Kirstein. Although not from the same branch as Jean Kirstein, he joked and said that means he knows more about the subject of their presentation than Eren does.

They argued back and forth for one more week until they were both exhausted. They were in Eren's home and Armin was too tired to argue with Eren any more so he just decided to fall back on his bed and watch Eren talk to a wall.

Eren's mother visited once, just to make sure they were ok. The irony of the situation did not miss her. She joked that their situation should be reversed. It should be Armin defending his namesake's honor in her opinion.

Eren's sister also stopped to check. She was the gothic type, she mumbled something about an inevitable love and then shook her head at Eren.

Otherwise, they spend most of their time arguing over who was right.

Eventually, when both were out of breath and an awkward silence was choking them both, Eren asked something Armin himself wondered. "Why are you so against it?" He asked. "Why are you defending the idea that Armin Arlert wasn't a time traveler so dearly?"

The question strikes Armin for once. He sighs. He picks on his fingers and for once, decides to tell the truth. "Because if-- if-- this theory is true, that means Armin Arlert lived through this war twice." Armin mumbles. "... *Twice* ."

Eren smiles. "Ahhh you're feeling sympathy for your namesake~?"

"How can you not? Didn't Eren Yeager mean anything to your parents?"

Eren shrugs. "Honestly, I don't know. My dad was a huge titan nerd when he was a kid. That's why he named me Eren... The last Titan."

Eren looks into his hands, then at Armin. "You know, he lived a good life." he whispered. "Even if he had lived through this war twice, he still made the rest of his years count."

Armin hums. "Still... It hurts to think he went through all that, thought he would, just to lose the love of his life instead." he whispers. "It's... Not fair."

"He never really lost Eren Yeager." Eren points out. "Armin Arlert spent the rest of his life making Eren Yeager's gift count. He became one of the most renowned scientists in the field of marine, and even named his adopted son Eren." he shakes his head. "I don't think Arlert was suffering, I even want to think he was enjoying his life. He lived so long and studied what he loved. He became a scientist and a professor in the field he loved and left paradise to live somewhere his presence was needed."

Eren smiles. "He lived until 105. That enough explains how dearly he was guarding Eren Yeager's present."

Armin can only hum in response. "You really do know a lot about Eren Yeager. Or maybe you just know a lot about Armin Arlert."

"What about you?"

Armin presses his mouth to a thin line. "Actually... My name has little to do with Armin Arlert. My mom opened a fantasy book once and decided to randomly name me the first character she saw. And she saw a side character named Armin."

Eren choked. "*Really ?*"

"Yeah. I mean-- it's not that strange. Considering how many smart characters are named Armin or a variation of it in Paradisian fiction." Armin shrugs. "Besides, I like it. It gives me power."

"It does?"

Armin nods. "It does..."

Eren took a deep breath. "Alright." he hits his knees. "You know what, Armin. Fighting with each other won't let us get a full mark."

Eren smiled knowingly. "In this scenario, I'm going to do what my name sake did. Eren Yeager let Armin Arlert lead the way, I am going to do the same with you in this project."

Armin sits up. "What? Really?"

"Yes." Eren raises his hands in defeat. "Eren Yeager decided to trust Armin Arlert. And so will I."

Armin pushes his glasses up. "Oh, how noble of you."

"The good news is. You can't find a person that loves the time travel theory dearer than me. So I know every excuse our classmates will use."

Armin grins from ear to ear. "Worry not, Eren. I will make sure our projects get far far more than an A+!"

Eren smiles in return.

The result of one week of debacle was an A+ and a rare smile on Shadis' face. Although Eren still believed Armin Arlert to be a time traveler, he kept it to himself for this one presentation.

"This doesn't mean you were right." Eren said after both of them were walking home after school.

Armin hugged his books tightly. "Yeah sure. A+ says you're wrong."

Eren shrugs. He pushes his hands deeper into his pockets and his green eyes stare into the distance. "You know... I never thought about it this way..."

"What way?"

"That if Arlert really was a time traveler, he lost his friends and family twice over." he whispered. "To me, it was always a cool story about titans my father likes to talk about."

Armin hums. "Yeah... Sometimes it's easy to forget they were actually humans. Not just names."

"Sometimes, I think of titans as fairy tales." Eren chuckles. "But meh... I'm just happy to be born in a world without them."

"Thanks to Eren Yeager."

"Thanks to Armin Arlert." Eren corrects.

Armin laughs. This debate won't finish until more evidence proves either side wrong.

Soon, they reach the street where they have to diverge their paths. Eren saluted with two fingers. "Well, Mr Im-always-right."

"Farewell, conspiracy theorist." Armin shot back.

Eren rolled his eyes. He turned around and started walking away.

Armin walked him, his eyes glued to his back. Time moved much slower as Armin's mind weighed the pros and cons of his next words. This time, Armin decided to be brave. He takes a deep breath and summons all the courage he can. "Eren!" he calls and his teammate halts.

Eren turns around, only looking at him from the corner of his eyes, waiting for a question.

Armin swallows hard. "There is... There is an Arcade around here." he mumbles. "Would you like to... Like to go there sometime? Just... Just the two of us."

Eren blinks in surprise.

First he looks around to see if there is anyone else, then points at his own chest. "Me?" Then, his smile reaches his eyes. "Sure! Why not."

Armin bit his lip and fought the heat rising to his face. "Good, I'll text you the address. Meet me there at 6 pm Friday, sharp!" he ordered. Armin turned around and ran away as fast as he could.

He could hear Eren laughing out loud. "Aye Aye, commander Armin!" he laughs.

Armin already regrets it.

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~~~~~***The End***~~~~~

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Wow. Heh, it is over now! How was it? If you've reached this point here is my heart and I wish you a good sleep after this binge reading☆☆

Now, I want to thank a few of this fics readers. Let me have a heart to heart--

Toonytwilight: man, your one liner comments kept me going lol. It was nice knowing someone is reading every single chapter

Candy2121:thanks for your long comments and detailed thoughts and the fanart, i loved it.

Eiramuen        Thank you for always having my back. And for your gorgeous art.

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MagnificentRainbowDisaster: loved your hearts!

IvoryQuill: I loved your emotional support and hearing you thoughts!

Thankvrm. Thank you so much for reading and commenting,

Lilyinswimmingpool. Thank you for your consistent support

ShiranaiAtsune. Thank you for always being there-- most of the time.☆☆ ☆☆

plutobic. I don't know if you're here still but thank you so much for being there most of the wat

GlassMind: I loved your detailed thoughts and honestly, sometimes you pointed out things that Id totally forgotten and helped me so much with the continuity of this story. If you're reading this, again, thank you so much

AromanticReader: man, every time I updated, I waited to see what you'd say. I really really tried to redeem historia and Dina in your eyes but man did I fail xD

1u1u1u1: you're the last because I just met but mannn I loved reading your comments. It felt like the story being shaped it my head all over again.

And to Knowall, Gata\_05, SunsetFlowersColoursandBreezes, soodarling, FaelynStar, whoiscecelia, CuteArminIsBestArmin and any others Ive forgotten to mention. Thank you so much for your support and I hope the best for you all.

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Farewell, and goodbye.

-Sabrina.

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